

Truth or Dare

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Truth or Dare

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Summary

After many months of self-denial, Hermione receives an envelope of explicit photos of her and a one night stand she had four months earlier.

She could have ignored what seeing those photos made her feel, but the vile message attached that threatened to leak the photos to the press was the catalyst to accept the truth. Hermione has a stalker.

Her reputation had struggled in the last year, as well as some of her confidence.

When she seek's Harry's advice, it is sad, but honest. The ministry is in turmoil as crime is on the rise and targeted muggleborn attacks are spreading. Harry suggests hiring a private investigation firm that he's worked with in the past and Hermione reluctantly agrees.

The P.I. handling her case is, none other than Draco Malfoy, the man in the photos from her one night stand.

As their path takes sharper and darker turns, Hermione and Draco have to risk their own secrets coming forth to keep each other and the rest of the ones they love safe.

Chapter 1

Hermione Granger slumped on the worn leather couch in the Auror's office she used to know so well.

She sat blankly staring at the wall and noticed a crack in the pattern in the corner of the ceiling. It spiderwebbed through the dark panels, hardly discernible, but it would make sense to her that she would find the one broken thing inside the office.

Like attracts like. The fear inside her that she had been ignoring had officially cracked open.

Just a sliver, but it was continuing to grow. She'd tried to convince herself she was fine. That this was just her being paranoid. She was a very capable witch. She had been to fucking war for crying out loud. The self-assurance she'd repeated the past few months had finally stopped working. Perhaps it never really worked and just allowed her ignore reality a little while longer.

She had a stalker.

Admitting it made her skin crawl and her stomach cramp painfully. Tonight things had progressed in a way that was going to be the beginning of a very difficult path. The click of the door drew her attention away from the cracked wall.

“Hermione,” Harry’s voice was gentle. Immediately, her eyes stung and her throat tightened painfully. She tried to school her features and swallow her emotions, she needed to be strong and brave like everyone told her she was, but her face was doing a weird tremoring thing and her eyes were already blurring with tears

Harry sat next to her and pulled her into a tight hug. She leaned on his shoulder and let out a shuddering sob.

“This is so embarrassing. This is so,” she choked. “I feel so violated...”

There were many horrific things she’d endured as a child. Things she was still unpacking and working through. She shouldn’t be *this* upset about some unseemly photos. She was a grown adult, she’d had sex. She shouldn’t be ashamed, but she was, for a multitude of reasons. The shame felt so heavy, so sticky, it coated every part of her insides. There was nothing she could do to get it out of her, there were no potions to take, no spells to whisper, there was nothing but the tar-like residue weighing her down her every breath.

Harry gently rubbed her back, staying silent as she cried. Several minutes later she pulled back, and a new wave of embarrassment overcame her, sending her cheeks in flames. She hadn’t seen Harry in over three months and this is what happens the first time they speak. Gods she was a needy, mess.

"Thank you for coming," Hermione said.

"Of course, and you have nothing to be embarrassed about. Nothing at all." He said, emphatically. She avoided eye contact regardless. Harry waited for a breath and continued. "Can you give me a summary of what happened this morning? You don't have to give the specific details, just the things you feel are important to know."

Hermione let her tears fall as she recounted the events that led her to his office as seven in the morning.

She had worked through the night with Pansy, the Slytherin-turned-P.R.agent-turned-best friend. They were both night owls keeping each other fueled on coffee and snacks as they planned her upcoming book tour and Hermione worked on her next book. Only an hour ago, the early morning owl post came with. The envelope looked innocent, she figured it was another charity event requesting her attendance, but as soon as she lifted the sealed paper it exploded.

Hermione didn't have her wand on her and for a very real moment she thought she might die.

The envelope magically spit out hundreds of miniature polaroid photos, bursting all over the living room. Pansy and Hermione had been sitting in between piles of reference materials, stacks of books, printed copies of Hermione's latest tabloids Pansy had been scowling at, plus lots of trash from their eating habits through the night. The photos were everywhere, in all crevices. The shock from realizing what the photos depicted was quickly overshadowed by the note that came with it. The note that said. *"I hate you. You really are a whore like everyone says. Should I share these with the public so they who you truly are?"*

"I'll need to make an official report," Harry replied, quietly.

"Okay, can I speak with a female, please?" The exhaustion radiated through Hermione's bones, tightening especially in her chest. "It's not that I don't trust you, Harry. You're welcome to read the report..." she swallowed hard. "And of course look at all the...evidence if necessary, but-."

"Absolutely," Harry nodded. "Whatever is best for you."

He shifted in his seat, his gaze dropping to his hands, wringing them together. He cleared his throat, "Hermione."

"What is it?" She almost didn't want to know the way his discomfort was so obvious.

"I want to be honest with you about this," Harry started, still wringing his fingers into knots. "You can put in a stalking complaint, but I want to warn you about the reality of the department right now." He lowered his voice, "There are some off-shoots of Voldemort supporters creating their own repackaged version of his twisted theories about muggle borns. They're growing in popularity and the ministry is divided intensely about how to handle it. Some are saying to ignore it wholly, so there isn't more attention to it. But those people are also being rumored to have ties to these groups. The other side is saying we need to be more

aggressive by doing whatever means necessary to fight them off, even whispers of a draft for a military. It's causing a lot of strain on every department. Funding is being held hostage because of both sides inability to come to a fucking agreement. We are currently on a hiring freeze but our office is so overworked, Hermione. I want you to get the support you deserve, but you've ran the same spells I would have ran on the package and we know there is no way to track the sender. Once an auror sees that conclusion, they will put the file away to sit in a drawer and gather dust until you have another incident." Harry's eyes looked so sad, with lines worry. She was just starting to realize how tired he looked too.

"So you don't think it's worth reporting?" Hermione's shoulders sagged.

"No, I *do* think you should start a file. You should track this legally to start building a case, but what I'm saying is no one is going to do anything about it other than take a report. Unfortunately, I don't have the budget or resources to start an investigation team for one person. I can't even make a case to my superiors, because there just isn't any money."

"Not even for Hermione Granger?" She hated sounding entitled, but she rarely used her name to get anything special and this was surely an appropriate opportunity to use that privilege.

"That's another point I was going to bring up," he tugged at his collar. "On one hand, I do want you to be as accurate as possible in your report, but I also worry that the wrong person will see the report. I will do my best to keep it confidential and will personally recheck the privacy charms on the file. I'll go after every single person who violates them, but the way things in the ministry are going is a good representation of how things have been here too." He lowered his voice even further. Department heads are picking ministry sides. Some are advocating for death eater's rights and lesser punishments for those how are hurting muggle-borns. A few aurors in my department have started to look the other way when it comes to reporting anything at all. I would hate for someone like that to get this report and leak it, or worse blackmail you on top it."

"So what do you suggest I do?" Hermione had begun to cry at the hopeless picture Harry painted for her. It was all true. Muggle born crime had increased and she'd heard the rumors of the distasteful things aurors were doing. It didn't surprise here to hear about the inner workings of the ministry, it had been a mess since the end of the war.

"Report the stalking incident, don't put details of the pictures," Harry swallowed. "And I'd like to help you hire a private investigator. I have worked with a team offering some consulting services here and there and they're really, really good. I can set up a meeting for you." Harry looked at her nervously.

"I don't know." Hermione chewed on her lip. It already felt dramatic to file a report, only for it to be pointless, but to hire an investigator... hire an entire team... "Perhaps a report is enough for now." Her head ached from the lack of sleep and she just wanted to go home. She had a desperate desire for a hot bath and falling into soft sheets.

"I know that this isn't the first time you've gotten threatening mail, Hermione. This is an escalation. I refuse to let you make yourself vulnerable. Please let me help you. I can coordinate all the details and I'm happy to work with them, from an auror side to protect you

here. I'll volunteer pro bono. At least let them set up an initial security sweep and reinforce some protection charms. They do some really advanced work that you'd admire."

Hermione sighed and rubbed her temples. "Fine." He made a good point. She had too many threats recently. She couldn't allow herself to become desensitized to violence like this, just because she'd endured worse before.

"Great. I'll set up the meeting." Harry said. "And I hate the circumstances, but I am really glad to see you, Hermione. I'm sorry...I'm so sorry..." He trailed off running a hand through his disheveled hair.

"Me too, Harry." Hermione grabbed his hand and gave him a look of understanding. The way things had ended with her and Ron left a huge weird elephant in the room with them. Both of them had their own issues with Ron, but at different points of time. When Hermione had begun dating Ron, it severely complicated her relationship with Harry. Hermione wondered now if Ron did it on purpose, pushing them apart, during their year long relationship. Right before Hermione broke up with Ron, his and Harry's relationship seemed to be getting better, but she didn't know where she stood with Harry.

"Have you talked to him recently?" Hermione asked, knowing they needed to get this over with.

"Last month," Harry shrugged. "We had drinks. He's different now though. With all his money. It's just... weird. What about you? How have you been feeling since the breakup. The fucking prophet and all those trashy tabloids were cruel to you. I'm sorry about that."

Hermione sighed. "I saw him a few weeks ago. I told him, during our breakup I was committed to being friends and he agreed. So we've met for coffee a few times. It's been fine. He got weird when I asked about you though." Hermione ran a hand over her face. "Harry, I really wanted to reach out more, but I was in such a weird place in my life while dating him. I felt like I had to choose him, I had to. I was working so much, last year getting my book finished and I was so stressed and I know I was so forgetful. I felt like I was forgetting everyone else in my life. It felt like I only had room to remember his long list of needs, with only scraps of me leftover. I loved him so much I wanted to give him everything, but I was burning out by the end. He was draining me and I couldn't even see it. Then one day I realized I'm never going to stop trying to change the world. I want to believe in my dreams and my future and-" Hermione wiped a few tears away.

"We both know how he can get," Harry said, squeezing her hand. "You can't blame yourself for his poor behavior. I'm glad you finally saw your own needs as important."

"That's been the hardest part of the breakup, I think so many of my feelings have been tied to the experiences we've all had together, we lived through a war and faced real terror. You two were my family in every sense of the word, and my feelings were so strong for him, but they were always a bit confusing for me. I don't know, I'm rambling now. I just want you to know that regardless of Ron, I still consider you one of my dearest friends."

"You don't have any need to explain, Hermione. I feel similar, obviously it's different, but" his brow furrowed. "I'm glad we are talking about this because he meant so much to me too.

He was my first friend, my brother, more than that we were warriors together, leaders, but sometimes enemies. I know I was a cliche, wonder-boy but damn it..." Harry sighed, a sad smirk on his face. "Here we are like old times, venting about Ron."

"Just like old times." Hermione gave a small huff of laughter. "Fighting battles with you if comforting."

"I could have reached out too. I think..." he blew out a breathe. "I think there were things after the war we all had to work through. There was a lot of pressure to be close to each other during that time too, but that's just unfair. We don't have to pretend to keep up being the golden trio. We can just be ourselves now."

"Thank you so much for understanding me, Harry."

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"So," Pansy laid next to her in her bed. Hermione had never been more grateful for her care.

After sleeping most of the day, she woke up to the smell of freshly baked pumpkin chocolate chip cookies and pumpkin soup. Pansy had cleaned up the mess from the photos before she got home. Pansy was the one who had insisted Hermione meet Harry immediately and report the incident. If it hadn't been for Pansy's insistence she would have probably found a hundred reasons to procrastinate reporting it. She loved Pansy with her entire heart and wondered almost daily how she'd lived her life without being friends with the raven-haired, quick witted, ridiculously-good-at-everything best friend, but she did not want to confess the details that Pansy wanted.

Hermione knew Pansy knew.

Pansy knew that Hermione knew Pansy knew.

And Hermione knew that Pansy knew that Hermione knew Pansy knew.

But that oily shame coated her mouth preventing her from saying it out loud.

It made her feel sick. It made her feel dirty. Revisiting the memory still hurt.

Pansy's eye's softened. "Hermione." Her voice, sharp as a sword. It was that specific way she said her name, the way she spoke with loving authority, that made Hermione want to believe her next words, "You have done nothing wrong."

Hermione started to cry. It felt like the complete opposite, like she deserved this kind of humiliation after sleeping with a man that hated her. But even with it not feeling true, it felt good to hear. Especially from Pansy, because she knew Hermione the best.

"I know, but-"

"No. Buts." Pansy said. Hermione remained quiet and Pansy sighed. "You slept with Draco Malfoy. Big fucking deal. He's slept with plenty of witches."

Pansy's smirk told Hermione everything she needed to know about what was going on in her mind. "And those pictures are..." Pansy's eyes widened, as she fanned herself. Hermione sniffed loudly and grabbed a pillow.

"You two are so. Fucking. Hot." *Bingo*.

Hermione wacked Pansy in the head with the pillow. Pansy huffed a laugh as she snatched the pillow away and tucked it under her chest, laying on her stomach. "How many times did you guys fuck?" Pansy's teeth sunk into her lip, arching a brow. "Those pictures show a lot of positions."

Hermione started laughing and Pansy's ridiculous expression. "A lot." Hermione covered her face with her hands, as the red flush crept up her cheeks.

"I can't believe you've kept it a secret this a secret for what, four months? Post breakup sex is always hot, I wish you would have told me sooner. Wait until Theo finds out. He's going to be so pissed you-" Pansy shot up, pointing at her. "You cannot be serious."

*Fuck.*

"I'm sorry," Hermione pleaded. "I'm sorry."

"How did he find out before me?" she shrieked. "I was in the bloody room when those photos exploded!"

"Theo was here the morning I came home." Hermione sat up, sighing.

Pansy's eyes lit with a new sense of curiosity, "You went to his place?"

"Sorta." Hermione shook her head. "The point is, I walked in like I had just been, well, thoroughly fucked, and then..." Hermione trailed off. That morning was sad. She'd felt so overwhelmed and sad and embarrassed. "I couldn't find my clothes on the way out, so I grabbed his shirt and resized it. I figured I'd send it back to him or something, but I just had to get out of there. What I didn't realize is that the collar was monogrammed. And for some strange fucking reason it was charmed so that if someone else wore his shirt the monogram glowed. I walked into my flat with glowing D. M. initials around my neck. And apparently Theo just had Tea with Narcissa. Draco was there wearing a similar monogrammed shirt. I was also incredibly hungover. I had no capacity to deny it."

"Fine," Pansy rolled her eyes. "I'll let this one slide, but the next fucking thing that happens like this, I call dibs."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I have sworn off one night stands. I'm sorry to disappoint you that I won't have any more stories like this."

"Have you spoken to him since?"

“No.” Hermione cleared her throat.

“Are you going to tell him about the pictures?”

“I think I have to, don’t I?”

“Hard to say, You can’t see his face, but if anyone sees the sleeve of tattoos, they’ll be able to identify him immediately. That’s how I knew.” Then Pansy’s smile became devious. “And?”

“What?” Hermione rolled her eyes

“How was it? Was it good?” Pansy smirked.

“You know how it is,” Hermione shrugged. “You’ve shagged him.”

Pansy scoffed. “When he was sixteen doesn’t count! Do you think he knew what he was doing then?” She searched Hermione’s eyes and then her face dropped. “Oh, so it was that good?”

“I didn’t say anything!” Hermione fell back into her pillows.

“Oh my gods! Tell me!”

Hermione turned to face Pansy, “It was good okay. Really fucking, blow-your-mind good. But it was a mistake. Clearly, I’m being punished for sleeping with him and getting any pleasure from it. I’m fucked in the head, that man bullied me for years and has avoided me for even longer. It’s not like he reached out afterwards either.”

“You forgave me.” Pansy said, quietly. “It’s not like I was much different.”

“It is different, Pans.” Hermione laid on her back staring at the ceiling again. “It’s completely different with him.”

Pansy laid next to Hermione, laying her head on her shoulder. “Okay, we will table discussion of Malfoy for later. What are you really afraid of? What’s going on?”

Hermione began to cry instantly. She was crying so much lately and she hated it. “This is going to leak everywhere. It’s going to be used to smear me right before my new book comes out about muggleborns. They’ll certainly find out it’s Draco. Instead of being seen as an author, I’ll be labeled as some self-hating whore. I’ll be labeled as a gold-digging hypocrite for sleeping with a man that publicly advocated for blood supremacy. It will fuel all of those rumors Ron spread that I was cheating on him because I worked at a hotel a few times.” She wiped away her tears. “I’m going to be in another drawn out headline cycle. I just stopped seeing them about my breakup with Ron. I don’t think I can handle another round of this.”

“Those are real fears. I understand why you’d feel all of those things. It’s okay that you don’t want to discuss your sex life with the world, especially as complicated as your connection to Draco is.” Pansy let out a frustrated breath. “Well, what the hell did Potter say? Is he doing his job and hunting the fucker down or what?”

Hermione relayed the conversation between her and Harry. Pansy was quiet for a long time, contemplation in her eyes.

“What is it?” Hermione sniffled.

“Oh,” Pansy’s face became blank. “Nothing, I’m just surprised Potter is smart enough to think of something that I agree with. It’s a really good idea.”

“Yes, that is strange. I expected you to at least have a few objections.” Hermione eyed her best friend suspiciously.

“Well even a broken clock is right twice a day. Today was the day for Potter. I don’t expect it to be a habit of mine,” Pansy said.

“You two would get along well if you would just be willing to hang out with him.”

“The way he treated you while you were dating Weasley was rude. And I’m not over that.” Pansy raised her chin.

“Well I am.” Hermione sighed. “I’m over all the drama that was that period of my life, most of it is a blur. I don’t really want to talk about Ron though.”

“Hermione,” Harry’s voice echoed through her flat.

“Hi,” Hermione trudged over to the fireplace with a blanket wrapped around her greeting Harry’s floating head.

“Tomorrow at eight am work for you?” Hermione had to search through the thick fog that had settled in her brain to understand what he was talking about. “Oh, right. Sure.”

“Yep, works for her,” Harry called behind him. “See you in the morning.”

“Glad that it works for me too!” Pansy called from her bedroom.

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Hermione began the following morning like she did most days, under-slept, over-caffeinated, and buzzing with anxiety. Today seemed to be extra special, because her level of anxiety had doubled since she woke. She tapped her foot in the conference room impatiently. The investigators were late. This had to be a bad sign. She sat on the other side of a long table staring at the door.

“Relax,” Pansy whispered from the right of her. “It’s going to be fine.”

“Great. Thanks. I’m relaxed now,” Hermione said.

“I love you, too.” Pansy patted her shoulder. “Well, Potter, when the hell were they supposed to be here?” Harry sat directly across from Hermione, Pansy spoke with the same respect she

gave her own family, which was none at all. Pansy made her disdain for Harry completely obvious any time they were together.

"Any minute," Harry gulped. Pansy had that effect on most men.

The door opened and all three of their heads swung to Theodore Nott. He moved to Hermione, throwing his arms around her. Hermione returned the hug gratefully. "You didn't have to come."

"Of course I'd be here. There is no other place I should be." Theo kissed Pansy on the cheek and then gave Harry a long look over.

"Potttter." He drew out Harry's name like purr. He loved making Harry uncomfortable just as much as Pansy did, except, Theo did it without menacing looks and more with the flirty ways he said Harry's name.

"Nott," Harry gave him a nod, a red blush creeping across Harry's face. Harry looked down at his notepad trying to avoid Theo's gaze. Pansy looked over her request list for the investigators regarding Hermione's press and book tour. Hermione glanced at the clock again watching the second hand tick by. A flashing moment where she thought of Draco, a bad habit of hers over the years she'd learned how to dismiss quickly. A shiver ran down her spine.

The door opened and Hermione met cold, grey eyes. As if she summoned him, Draco Malfoy walked into the conference room, full of that same arrogant, powerful air about him. But it was as if he glanced over her, or through her, not quite meeting her eyes.

All of those moments she'd stuffed into that secret chamber of her mind, all of the twisted feelings she'd kept bottled up, all of the thoughts she'd been able to dismiss came flooding back. And that night with him was the first to fill her mind in vivid, ripe detail.

Chapter 2

Four months earlier

Hermione Granger sat in a posh muggle bar that was becoming her unexpected, newfound sanctuary. The space was a mixture of cool blues and greens, low golden lights, plush seating, and absolutely delicious chips. It grounded her. They had an excellent dessert selection, the most perfect booth in the back corner where she could just *be*. Or perhaps it was the affordable red wine providing that feeling. And damn she really did love their chips.

Regardless of the reason, she found herself at the bar weekly, sometimes more. Four weeks ago, after moving into her new flat she happened upon the restaurant on a walk in her new neighborhood. Now it was early June and her summer evening walks had turned into her routine. She loved ending her evening with wine and crisp chips. Even her waitress started to recognize her, but she was the only one and that was the best part about coming to a muggle establishment. No one gawked at her. No one snapped pictures of her mid-bite that would end up on the Daily Prophet talking about her weight.

Grabbing pictures of the golden girl had become a game to too many people. Her photos were all over the Prophet right now because of her breakup, but in this place, no one recognized her. No one whispered judgments about her clothing or hair or body or if she was a cheating little witch. No one even looked in her direction due to the muggle repelling charm placed as she sat down, altering it only for her waitress. It had been five years since the battle at Hogwarts, her celebrity-like status had only grown more intense as her career as a writer took off, her reputation, however ebbed and flowed as the tabloids dictated. She got hate mail and fan mail weekly.

Hermione sipped the last of her red wine and frowned. Despite being here, she was in a particularly foul mood this evening. If she was being honest with herself, she'd been in a foul mood since...well... a long time actually, but honesty was not that important to her at the moment.

Ron's voice repeated in her mind once more, *It's just too much, Hermione. You read too much, you're too picky, you work too much, you're volunteering every weekend..."*

The words she replayed over and over. They hurt more than she cared to admit, but in a way that also brought clarity. That's the part that helped her break up with him. The words made her angry and sad, and truly loathe herself because she only had herself to blame at the end of the day.

This evening's mood could be most certainly blamed on the most recent letter from Ron. He sent them almost daily since their break up. Each one, almost identical to the last.

Mione,

I'm a complete idiot sometimes

Please stop ignoring me. This is getting ridiculous. I love you and you know that I would do anything for you.

Just come home. Please. I miss you.

Yours forever, Ron

Interesting. He chose to use ridiculous today. Yesterday was, “*This is so unnecessary.*” She wondered if he used a thesaurus each time to change it up.

She tried to drink more of her wine, and frowned when it was empty. Notably, Ron had in fact *still* not apologized. Not one single letter he wrote said the words, *I'm sorry*.

Ron was right about one thing, he was a complete idiot if he thought the letters were working. She had no intention of getting back together and the fact that he couldn’t understand that over four weeks later demonstrated how thick his skull was.

Harry and Ginny broke up so amicably shortly after the war that Hermione hoped they could be the same. It wouldn’t be like it was in school before the war of course, but nothing had been the same since the war and she did hope they could maintain some sort of friendship, even if it were from a distance.

Hermione pulled a pen from her beaded bag and wrote directly under his note.

Ronald,

I will not be moving back. I care about you as a person and as a friend. At this time I need space to properly process everything. I hope we can still be respectful friends moving forward. Let's get coffee in a few weeks.

Best,

Hermione

She folded the parchment and placed it in her bag. She was grateful for the events of last month, even if the words Ron hurled at her still haunted her a little, it was a wake up call.

A feminine voice cut through her thoughts.

“For you miss. From the gentleman at the bar.” The server set down a glass of red wine, exchanging it for her previous glass.

Hermione didn't take food or drinks from strangers as a general rule, not after a leering wizard at a magical nightclub spiked her drink with a black market potion that would have left her paralyzed from the neck down.

Luckily, Hermione knew how to spot the oily sheen because she had recently published an entire textbook on poisonous potions. She shuddered at the memory. If anyone thinks they can poison Hermione Granger they have another thing coming for them.

Although she was in a muggle pub she couldn't be too sure someone hadn't followed her or... She scanned the room with eagle eyes as her fingers twitched with the urge to grab her wand. It was surprisingly crowded for a weeknight and due to the glass of wine she just consumed or rather inhaled, her eyes took a moment to focus. Her eyes flitted past muggles in well dressed clothes laughing loudly, her waitress taking a new table's order, shocking white-blond hair and grey eyes, two women giggling next to...

She jerked her head, blinked quickly and then again slowly. There was no way one glass of wine could make her hallucinate. Right?

She looked back to her glass of wine in front of her. Did she accidentally take a drink of this? Was it actually poisoned? Whipping her head back, she locked eyes with Draco Malfoy.

Draco Fucking Malfoy. Draco Fucking Malfoy in a muggle bar.

Hermione's brain short circuited processing her current reality.

No one had seen him since the end of the war.

Harry spoke for Malfoy's defense at the trial. Hermione offered a written testimony of the events she witnessed and attended the public hearing. Ron had refused to do either. Draco had been sentenced to eighteen months in Azkaban, but ended up staying ten months due to good behavior and after that Draco Malfoy became a ghost. Everyone expected the Malfoy heir to take his position in high society and reclaim the Malfoy legacy, but instead he exited it entirely. No one had seen him. There hadn't been one single photo of him in The Daily Prophet, much to his mother's dismay.

Malfoy sat with a casual posture that still somehow managed to be elegant and arrogant, on a bar chair. *No one looks like that sitting on a bar chair.* He wore a white fitted dress shirt with black trousers, and that same *stupid* smug, half-smile half-sneer, with a glass of red wine lifted slightly in toast.

Oh for fucking merlin's sake, of course it's poisoned.

Malfoy probably hexed the wine with slug vomiting or something equally as awful just to fuck with her. To make her more miserable than she knew she already looked. He still carried that overflowing sense of self importance from being wizarding royalty as he held his glass waiting for her to return the toast.

Sharp indignation shot through her. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. With a bit of wordless magic she charmed her beaded bag beside her.

She plastered a sweet, shy smile on her face while lifting her glass and then rapidly dumping the contents in her purse. She offered her own version of the sneer smile. A smile? A smear?

His eye brows rose and a small smile appeared. Hermione didn't like it one bit, but she refused to break eye contact. She watched him and he watched her. Both set on reading the other's next move.

For a moment she wondered if she was hallucinating again for how long they stared at one another. It was a strange standoff of sorts. Draco tapped the shoulder of the waitress that served Hermione and gestured towards her. Once again the waitress bought over another glass of red wine.

"Looks like it's your lucky night. He must really like you. Enjoy." She said with a chuckle.

Malfoy lifted his wine glass again in a haughty challenge. She glared at him and did not break eye contact from those intense grey eyes as she dumped the wine straight in her bag again and crossed her arms.

Was it completely childish? Yes. Was it really satisfying? Also yes.

Hermione waited for him to stand in rage and begin hexing her any minute now. Her hand settled against her wand. She couldn't let her guard down that he wouldn't try it in a muggle business. He had the kind of connections that would give him the ability to obliviate everyone in the room after a hex.

What she did not expect was his face to knock back in roaring laughter. Warm and rich.

His wide smile was infectious. She felt a small tug on her own mouth before forcing it into a frown.

He'd changed from a tall gangly boy to a tall, broad shouldered man. His sharp jawline and cheekbones filled out in a way that made him look so...she cut off that train of thought immediately. Malfoy approached her in confident, slow steps. He probably assumed she'd scurry away like some scared little mouse from the big bad snake. She held her chin higher as he stopped at her table, glaring at him in silent defiance.

"Hermione Granger." He drawled her name in a voice that had deepened to something beautifully smooth.

Irritatingly smooth, she corrected. And because he was closer she realized his face was also extremely irritating. He was entirely fucking irritating.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" She snapped. He sat down in her booth placing two glasses of red wine on the table.

"I'm trying to buy you a drink, but it seems like you're insistent on wasting...what is it now...400 galleons of wine."

She gaped at him. "What the fuck!" She gasped, appalled at the wasted wine and his ability to do so without a care.

“Are you going to make it 600?” He said as he slid one of the glasses towards her. She looked at the glass and then back at him, his eyebrow lifted in challenge.

“I’m not drinking your wine.” She held her chin higher and then remembered that Draco Malfoy was in a *muggle* bar. “Why are *you* here? Why are you in a *muggle* bar?” She emphasized the word muggle slowly as if he had trouble hearing. “Are you lost?”

Malfoy assessed her coolly, running his eyes over her. The weight of his stare made her skin feel hot. She shifted in her seat.

“This wine.” He pushed the glass closer to her. “Is a special blend imported from France. It’s not particularly famous, but I happened upon it at a night market in the village near my chateau and-”

“I don’t need your fancy wine, Malfoy,” she scoffed.

He ignored her. “You consistently order the same shitty red wine every time you come here and I wanted to show you what good wine actually tastes like.”

“Have you been following me? Is that why you poisoned the wine?” Hermione’s logical side knew she was being a complete bitch, but she didn’t care.

Everything was irritating her and she would take it out on him. He took it out on her plenty at school. It was her turn to return the torture, he deserved every minute of her bullying.

Malfoy stilled, jaw tense as the look in his eyes shifted. They were not the entertained version she’d just seen a moment ago. No, these eyes encompassed so much coldness Hermione actually shivered, making the back of her head prickle.

“Is that what you think?” He glanced at the wine glass. “You think I poisoned you?” His voice was hard and curt, fingers tightening on the wine glass stem. Hermione began to feel a bit confused or guilty perhaps... Fuck her moral compass.

“You’re very insistent on me drinking this wine,” she gestured towards the glass. “It’s the perfect place for such a crime. Why else would you know what I ordered? Clearly you’ve got some agenda.” She narrowed her eyes letting all her suspicion show.

He leaned back. “Yes, Granger,” he spat. “The agenda was to offer you a nice glass of red wine. Something better in taste than the shit you were drinking and I know what-”

“Ohhh, so you think you were being kind by rubbing your wealth in my face?” She laughed. “Nothing’s changed since school, then.”

She couldn’t stop herself. Her mouth just kept moving. Kept spitting out everything she could think of. Her emotions from the last several months were exploding, her mind was spinning with confusion and anger. He was the unfortunate target.

He took a deep breath and stared at her for a long moment before replying. Why hadn’t he just hexed her already? Her wand hand twitched with anticipation.

“I own this bar, Granger.”

“What?” Her brows furrowed. Surprise rolled through knocking her anger down a peg.

“I own this bar. I’ve seen you come in looking exhausted and you leave looking like you hate yourself. And trust me when I say I know what that looks like.”

“You don’t own a muggle bar.” Hermione shook her head, trying to process his words. Her head physically ached from the concentration it took to understand what he was saying. She needed more wine damn it. “You hate me. You hate muggles.”

“God’s Granger” He said quietly. She looked up at him and watched his face drop and he sighed loudly before moving to leave.

“Wait!” Hermione placed both hands on her face trying to rub some sense into her overwhelmed brain. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

He paused. “You’re right.” Hermione placed her hands on the table. “I’m feeling very miserable. I’ve had a shit day. A shit few months actually. I shouldn’t have said those things.” She met his eyes reluctantly.

He stared at her in contemplation. “With a tongue so venomous, I would have never guessed you were a Gryffindor.”

She offered a small, awkward smile. “Thank you for the wine. I’ll pay for the wasted glasses.”

“No need.” Malfoy stated in a way she wouldn’t argue with.

There was an awkward silence as they sat there. Hermione slowly grabbed the wine glass. “I still get threats.” she spoke quietly “And It’s been a bad week. It’s just..” She trailed off. She wasn’t about to spill her guts to Draco Malfoy.

Instead she took a sip of the wine she would never be willing to purchase again.

Oh merlin, it was *good*.

“Taste the poison yet?” Malfoy’s drawled, brow arched.

“Ha Ha” Hermione said before taking another long drink. “It’s bloody delicious, okay?”

Malfoy lifted his glass and she lifted hers and she decided that this wine was worth sitting here for. However bizarre this moment was, she also decided to stop analyzing and think about it in the morning.

For now she’d just enjoy her drink.

This is what she was supposed to be doing after all. Her mind healer told her she needed to relax more. Which Hermione surmised was a polite was of saying, stop being so paranoid and uptight.

“So you own a muggle bar?” She said brows raised in curiosity.

“Yes, the wizarding world hasn’t been very welcoming to me.” He said after sipping his own wine.

“I’m sorry.” She said, it was the only thing she could think to offer.

“Stop it.” He shook his head. “Stop apologizing”

“Sorry...I...” She sighed. Another silence settled between them, one in between awkward and comfortable. Not quite bad, but not quite easy. “Sooo where have you been the last five years?” Hermione drank more wine.

“Turns out the muggle world is quite nice. I’ve been working, mostly. I own this bar, among a few other things.” Malfoy’s expression was guarded, likely due to her callousness and she secretly wondered what would have happened had she just been grateful for the drink when he initially offered.

“Are you working right now?”

“No, just came in for the same reasons you did. It’s been a rather tough week and I needed the distraction.” He finished his wine and gestured to hers. “Another?”

One glass turned into a second glass which turned into a third and now she was drunk in a muggle bar with Draco Malfoy.

Malfoy insisted she drink water in between the glasses and she was feeling very, very... *good*. Relaxed in a way she hadn’t been in a long time, even if it was with a bloody Slytherin. Her mind healer would be proud of her right?

Somehow Hermione managed to be sitting in the middle of the booth facing Malfoy. *Very closely*.

“Tell me I’m curious, were the parties in the Slytherin common room as wild as the rumors?” Hermione asked, slurring her words a bit as she leaned against the leather seat.

“Some of them.” He chuckled. “We played a lot of truth or dare.”

“Really? Truth or dare? That sounds like such a silly game to play for posh Slytherins.”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong, Granger.” Draco wasn’t slurring his words at all, his voice only became raspier and more...she stopped that thought. “Before loyalty to one another, we are all loyal to our families and most importantly to ourselves. If played correctly you could learn valuable secrets and have something to blackmail someone with.”

Hermione laughed. “Self preservation knows no bounds.”

“That and it eventually turned sexual. So no one complained.” He shrugged.

"I bet you always chose dare." Hermione had never noticed the slight blue hue to his eyes. It was almost as if the icy exterior melted away and she got to see more of him. His silvery blonde hair fell forward in a messy way that Hermione certainly shouldn't find as attractive.

"And why's that?" His knee brushed hers sending a jolting sensation down her leg.

"Well, truth would leave you too vulnerable. You wouldn't risk exposing family secrets if you could simply follow a dare instead."

"And let me guess, you always choose the truth, because you're a self righteous swot, and believe in being courageous enough to speak the truth at all times. When in reality, deep down you're just scared of the unknown so you don't risk dares." He sipped more wine and Hermione's eyes fell to his mouth. Was she enjoying herself? Why wasn't this more painful and boring?

She scoffed. "I do prefer the truth in truth or dare, but that's because it's the most logical choice. It reduces unnecessary risk. It has nothing to do with fear. I'd honor the game's rules and bravely speak the truth, why would I be embarrassed about that?!"

She looked at him with satisfaction. They were both leaning towards each other and she could just barely feel the lingering wisps of his breath as he huffed a laugh.

She frowned.

"Oh my god! I do sound like such a self righteous snob." She buried her face in her hands as Malfoy laughed louder before ordering more wine.

"Okay so you have great taste in wine, but you're still a spoiled prat." She laughed. "We've spent so much money on wine."

"You haven't spent a single knut." Draco raised a brow. "But don't worry that pretty little mind of yours, Granger, my vaults have enough gold to buy this wine every day for the rest of my life and that of the next ten to twelve generations for myself and everyone in this entire restaurant. I'm just happy that you understand what good wine tastes like now." He took a drink. "Oh and you're wrong by the way."

She scowled and definitely ignored any feelings that her body had about hearing him call her pretty.

"About what?" She asked, distracted by the knee that brushed hers again.

"About how I'd play truth or dare."

"Then enlighten me." Hermione bit her lip.

"First, I'd never have a premeditated choice" His eyes had become half-moons, never straying from hers. "Predictability is how you become vulnerable. Second it would depend on every single person in the room. Who is there, why they're there and how they are asking the

questions. Third, most people are very simple. Their dares are not creative, their questions, often due to their own discomfort, are not direct. When you're asked a vague question, it's easy to be honest without revealing too much." He shrugged. "It's quite simple."

Hermione scoffed at his arrogance. He was so full of himself. "Truth or Dare, Draco?" Hermione asked after sipping her wine.

He smirked. "You don't want to play this game with me Granger."

"Are you scared?" Hermione tilted her head in defiance.

"Truth."

"What are two things you couldn't live without?" Hermione asked the first question she remembered from an ice breaker game she played with kids at a non profit she volunteered with.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Easy. Sferra Giza 45 bedsheets and the Italian shoes I'm currently wearing."

"Spoiled prat." Hermione muttered.

"Truth or Dare, Granger."

"Truth."

"What were you reading earlier that made you look like you were about to hex everyone in here?" His tongue swiped across his bottom lip.

"How long were you watching me?"

"Are you wishing you chose dare?" Draco's smug expression irritated her to no end.

"It was a letter from Ron."

Now Draco was the one that looked irritated, he picked up his wine glass. "Are you and the Weasel still involved romantically?"

The words, although asked casually, had an edge of condescension Hermione didn't care for.

"No we are not. I broke up with him last month actually." She tucked her hair behind her ear and for some reason kept explaining. "We didn't even date after the war. It was four years before we became romantically involved and now... and now we're... I'm...uh... figuring things out." Hermione did not like that words were so hard for her at the moment. "Truth or dare" She said, reaching for her wine glass.

He gave her a devious grin. "Dare"

"I dare you to..." Hermione's mind froze. She was a bright witch, she could certainly come up with something clever. Something embarrassing? Something silly? "I dare you to..." She

said it again hoping something would just roll off her tongue. "Fuck." She said, squeezing her eyes shut. Why was this so hard? She hated being bad at something this simple.

"You dare me... to fuck?" He said lazily and then a laugh rumbled through his chest. She really liked his laugh. She wanted to make him laugh again because his laugh made her laugh. And she really enjoyed feeling this way. Relaxed and carefree...happy.

"No dammit, it's the alcohol. I can't think of something good." Hermione laughed and began tapping her head. "Think. Think. Think."

"Like I said, most people's dares are very simple or boring." He leaned towards her.

"Okay, a truth for a truth then."

"That is not the game." He said flatly, his shoulder brushed her own and without realizing it she leaned into him, their arms brushing together, sending a blazing trail a fire down Hermione body.

"Okay fine, I dare you to tell me the truth to this question. In school, what would have been a mortifying secret of yours for me to know?" She waved a hand in the air.

"Not about war or Voldemort." She felt him tense next to her. "I just mean frivolous stuff, something that, had I found out, would have made you crazy embarrassed."

"Alright. Easy." Draco moved his arm around the back of the booth and lowered his head towards her. "I had a crush on you." He said it so matter of factly without even a hint of embarrassment.

Hermione burst out into a cackling laugh. "You dirty little liar. Tell me the truth." She poked him in the chest to emphasize it. "I want to know something absolutely mortify-"

He snatched her hand from his chest and held it in the space between them. Her cheeks warmed.

"You did not have a crush on me." She insisted. "You're a pureblood and... I... was inferior. There is no way."

"When I was a child I did believe that unfortunately." He cast his eyes down at their joined hands. "I went into school with prejudices and from an upbringing that convinced me muggle born witches and wizards were taking up space they didn't deserve and then I met Hermione fucking Granger." His hand squeezed hers. "Who was so utterly brilliant I could hardly understand how it was possible. A witch who was so skilled at magic that I had to reconcile the things I had been taught. The cognitive dissonance was challenging" He didn't look at her, but his thumb brushed her hand with a soft sweep. "But I was still an awful, cowardly little shit. A true asshole and for that i'm still making amends for. Being caught in a wizarding war at the age was..." His voice trailed off.

She pulled their hands into her lap. They were practically in their own cocoon at this point with his long arm wrapped around the back of the booth, both her hands around his hand,

their bodies so close. He was so much warmer than she imagined. All that icy exterior made it seem like he'd be a chilly as an iceberg, but he was soft, warm and she melted into his touch.

"We were all children... we were taken advantage of in so many ways." Hermione was tempted to say more, then an even more irrational part of her was tempted to hug him. Instead she reached for her wine. Letting his hand fall into her lap, which relaxed heavily on her thigh. She waited for him to move it, but when he didn't...

"Is it shocking that I find you attractive?" They finally looked at each other again, a swirl of strange discomfort and understanding to move on from the topic of war.

"Found." Hermione swallowed. "You said you *had* a crush on me, which is past tense. So you, um, you would need to amend that sentence... you found me attractive... Past tense."

"Believe what you want, but I answered your question." He stared at her, grey eyes daring her to call him a liar. He was so beautiful. His face was carved from marble, like a piece of artwork. Her whole body warmed with a flushing heat that settled between her thighs.

She pulled away slightly.

"When did you get so tall?" The words tumbled out of her under his scrutiny. "And this... this?" She waved a hand at his arm that leaned against the booth, grabbing his bicep.

"You're so..." Her hand wandered moved upwards running over corded muscle and the impossibly soft, clearly-very-expensive fabric of his shirt. "And your face!" She huffed.

A smug smile appeared on his full lips. "Do you see something you like, Granger?"

"It's so... it's so bloody..."

"Incredibly attractive? Devilishly good looking?" Draco drawled.

"So...irritating!"

Draco frowned. There was a beat of silence. "Truth or Dare, Granger?" His voice a vibrating whisper.

"Truth." she managed to say.

"Why haven't you moved my hand off your thigh?"

"I...uh..." Her mouth went dry as his large hand moved just a bit further up her thigh.

"Need a different question?" He leaned in closer, his nose brushing the shell of her ear. "If I kept moving my hand further, perhaps underneath this ridiculously short black dress, would you stop me?" Her breath hitched as her body turned into warm liquid.

She didn't respond.

She couldn't.

Her mouth opened, but nothing would come out. Nothing, except a small moan that absolutely mortified her.

His fingertips brushed the inside of her bare thigh

"Where's that venomous tongue of yours Hermione?" His velvet voice whispered against the shell of her ear, she could feel the faintest brush of his lips. Something coiled tight in her abdomen and then he suddenly pulled away including the hand that had gripped her leg.

The cool air rushed against her face as he shifted forward and lifted his drink to his mouth. A mask of cool indifference fell upon his features. The bastard was toying with her.

Hermione had one thought cross her mind and before she could rationalize that it was a very bad idea. Her wounded pride would not let him have the upper hand. He would not leave this bar thinking he got her so wound up.

"Truth or dare, Draco?" Hermione moved exiting the booth entirely. She was dizzy with alcohol and a rush of exhilaration and a whole hell lot of lust. She hadn't felt this carefree in months. Hermione leaned forward across the table and whispered.

"Would you like to know what this venomous tongue feels like against your cock?" She licked her bottom lip in emphasis. The satisfaction she felt was more than worth it as she saw his face go wide in pure shock and then they flared with heat. That was all she needed. Hermione chuckled happily with her win and turned to leave.

She made it just outside the bar when a strong hand wrapped around her arm swinging her around. Malfoy pulled her against his body. One arm snaking around her waist and the other cupped her cheek. His lips met hers.

It was soft. Inviting.

Even in their drunken reverie, he was waiting for her to respond before pushing for more. And she did. She opened for him, gripping his arms for support as her head swirled.

Their tongues clashed desperately.

Hot, spiraling need barreled through her body. She *knew* this was so stupid, this was wildly inappropriate.

"Can we go to your flat?" He said between deep kisses. His hands clutched her face, thumb swiping against her cheeks sending a sensation straight to her core.

"Yes.." Hermione sighed into his mouth. They stood on the sidewalk, the muggy breeze wrapping around them. He leaned into kiss her again slowly. It was several minutes before they stopped when Hermione suddenly said. "Actually, no."

"No?" He didn't hide his disappointment on his face or in his voice. Draco Malfoy had to be drunk if he was displaying this much emotion.

“Not mine. It’s a mess.” She kissed him, her arms sliding around his neck pulling herself tighter against his body relishing in the heat of him. “Take me to yours.” She couldn’t stop kissing him. “Right now”

“Mine? I don’t....”

She stopped him with a kiss. “Draco, I’d like you to fuck me.”

“Fuckng hell, Granger.” He removed a hand from her hip and slipped it into his pocket. “Grab on” He said as he held out a small muggle pen.

Hermione gave him a crooked smile. She was dizzy from kissing and all the alcohol she consumed and it wasn’t until her finger tips grazed the pen that she realized it was a portkey.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

NSFW!!! ;)

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the early support on this fic! I've had this idea swirling in mind for a while so I finally decided to take stab at it, while practicing my writing skills at the same time.

It's kind of wild to already see so much engagement, so thank you for the motivation!!

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Hermione landed gently wrapped in Draco Malfoy's arms. He began kissing her as soon as their feet touched solid ground and that's all they did for several long moments. These kisses were less hurried, more exploratory and sweet. Hermione's stomach fluttered as nipped at her lip.

He pulled away and she frowned

"Do you want dessert?" His disheveled hair and lazy smile reminded her so much of the young boy she knew at school she couldn't help but laugh. "What?"

"Dessert? You had dinner but you didn't eat any dessert. And I love sweets, so I think I'll find us something to eat." She stood there, mouth still open wide as he sauntered off, unsteadily. Hermione was happy to see that alcohol did indeed impact him. She found herself in a gorgeous hotel room. It was undoubtedly the nicest suite she'd ever seen, rich creamy fabric hung from floor to ceiling windows. She spun around admiring the open space. A relaxing sitting area, an enormous bed behind her. And out of the corner of her eye something sparkled.

No.

“We’re in paris?” Hermione gasped as she dropped her bag on a chair and ran to the glass doors of a balcony and flung them open. Just in the distance she saw the glittering Eiffel Tower stark against the night sky.

“You took us to Paris...”

“I’m in between places right now. I was finishing up a work thing here.” He said from what she assumed was the kitchen area by the sound of his clattering.

Hermione kept exploring, all of it impressive, but when she moved into the bathroom an audible moan left her lips.

Black and white marble floors laid way to an enormous round tub, set inside a marble platform. It looked more like a full sized jacuzzi. It could easily fit at least five people inside.

She wanted to take a bath right then and there. When would she have the opportunity again? Perfectly reasonable.

She charmed the water to flow faster, dumped in what looked like a very expensive bubble bath, and happily stripped off her clothes, sinking into the warm bubbly water.

This night was turning out better than she thought possible.

For a single moment, panic wanted to rear its head. She didn’t know how she would get home or what tomorrow would bring or how she would figure out all the other pieces of her life, but she shoved it all down. *Way down*. She would figure it out later.

For now, she would enjoy this very bizarre gift of pleasure in the form of a Paris hotel and Draco fucking Malfoy. And possibly fucking Draco Malfoy.

The heady warmth from all the water eased the tension in her chest as she sank further into the bath.

A deep chuckle made her pop her eyes open. “Making yourself at home I see.” Malfoy stood holding a bottle of champagne, and what looked like two bowls of... something. “Mind if I join you? I brought sustenance.”

Hermione swallowed. Her stomach fluttered again radiating to the tips of her toes. The real prospect of being naked in a bathtub together was intimidating. She’d offered to fuck him and this is what made her nervous? She didn’t have time to analyze it.

“There’s more than enough room.” Hermione nodded. Even though he’d be joining her completely nude she turned around as he undressed himself and stepped into the tub.

He took the place where she'd been relaxing and she stayed in the center, just out of touching range, bobbing her head in the water.

"Champagne?" Her eyes flicked to the obscenely large bottle in his hands.

"I'm celebrating." Malfoy stared at her with an expression she couldn't read.

"And what are you celebrating?"

"Come here, Granger." His voice was hotter than the water lapping against her skin. He sat relaxed against the back of the tub. Arms wide around the rim and bubbles up to his torso. Her eyes widened. His left arm was covered in a swirl of black and grey tattoos. She didn't have time to decipher each individual tattoo as she moved towards him. He tugged her closer, turning her against his chest.

"This is not what I had in mind for today and it turned out to be much better than I expected." He sighed contentedly. She leaned against his chest.

"What are we eating?"

"Open your mouth." He said into her ear. She did.

In front of her, two beautifully decorated ceramic bowls floated in front of her, strawberries and freshly whipped cream. Draco's hand reached over her shoulder, dipping a strawberry into the cream and pressed it into her mouth. She moaned and closed her eyes as she chewed the sweet treat.

"Another?" He spoke into her ear behind her. She nodded. He took a swig of champagne and then offered her some and she took a long drink.

"Does everything you do have to be so bloody perfect?" She was dumbfounded at what was happening. Draco Malfoy was feeding her strawberries and whipped cream in a beautiful bathtub, while drinking champagne in Paris. She had to have been poisoned. Or perhaps she was already dead and this was some kind of strange afterlife, mixed with hellish bits like Draco Malfoy but also all her favorite things like Paris, good food, and giant bathtubs.

"You, more than anyone, would know how imperfect I am." He said quietly as he fed her another strawberry. They sat that way for several minutes, trading the bottle of champagne back and forth, her being fed strawberries. The warmth of the water, the drinks, and his body were lulling her into a mixed state of relaxed bliss and heightened awareness.

After grabbing several strawberries she turned sideways to face him and the movement made her realize he was hard. She clenched her thighs together.

"I suppose I could feed you some as well," She said.

His mouth opened and she couldn't feel herself breathe as she held it to his mouth to bite. She could feel his stare on her face, but her eyes were on the corners of his mouth, where strawberry juice gathered. They locked eyes as he chewed slowly. It was so sexy, erotic even. His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

“Another?” Her voice was rough as sandpaper.

He shook his head, his half lidded eyes so full of heat and *want*.

Her gaze moved back to his mouth uncomfortable with the weight of his stare. Strawberry juice still lingered on his bottom lip, she licked it off with a sweep of her tongue. Without warning he lifted her so she straddled him, making her drop the strawberries in the process.

His lips found hers. Hermione lost in herself in his touch. His hands roamed her body, one roughly palming her breast then running down the length of her torso. His other hand moved up her thigh, gripping her ass.

Sex with Ron had been good... *she thought*, but suddenly she questioned everything she knew about what it meant to have good sex. Ron had never been much for foreplay and it never occurred to her to ask for it or want it.

A deep throbbing at her core sent her hips rocking forward searching for more friction.

She found it as she lid against his the length of him and they moaned into each other's mouth. Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, fingers twining and pulling at his silky hair. Before she could rock against him again Draco turned their bodies around. Water splashed over the sides as he lifted her onto the marble surrounding the tub. Her skin shivered as the cold surface touched the back of her legs, water and soapy suds dripped down her body. Bracing herself, she leaned back to Draco Malfoy kneeling between her legs. Her breath caught in her throat.

His hands rested on her knees, spreading her legs further apart.

Nothing had ever felt like this.

“Gods...” He breathed. “Look at you.” His eyes roamed her brazenly and it was hard not to feel a bit embarrassed. She started to close her legs but a look from him stopped her immediately.

It was then that it dawned on her, he was also completely naked.

Water dripped down his sculpted body, his chest muscles swelling as he breathed. She let her eyes follow the water dripping down his abdomen...down his trim waist...down...

She released a slow breath, trying not to gape at the length of him.

His hands started moving up her thighs. His arms. *Gods*. The veins and tendons flexed as he gripped her waist. He was chiseled like fine art. Sharp lines with cold beauty.

Hermione held her breath as his lips softly, reverently pressed a kiss on her sternum, just above her breast. He continued peppering her skin with these whisper soft kisses around the tops of her breasts. His nose grazed down the center of her chest, then the underside of her right breast, kissing her just below it. He kissed her again underneath the left breast, feather light and too gentle.

It was an intense contrast to everything else about him.

He continued a lazy trail of soft kisses across her stomach and as he descended lower Hermione felt like she might truly be on fire.

“Oh my gods” She whispered. She could only manage short, sharp breaths. She felt like she could come already. What the fuck was happening...

“Do you like being worshiped, Hermione?” He murmured the words against her skin against her stomach and her hips rolled forward in response, followed by a wave of goosebumps after the dark chuckle he let out afterwards. She rolled forward again, but his hands tightened on her hips this time, effectively stopping her.

“Patience.” he murmured as he ghosted a kiss to the top of her hip. He sank back into the water and pulled her leg out, kissing her ankle. Hermione's lips parted, watching as he dragged his nose up her calf leaving a blistering trail of electricity behind. He placed another kiss on the inside of her knee. Then he licked the same spot.

“Draco.” Her voice was a raspy whisper. Draco’s eyes drifted to hers, heady with lust and that smug, smiling-sneer combination, knowing he was sufficiently annoying her. Why hadn’t he fucked her already?

“Yes?” He said kissing the inside of her thigh and she lost her train of thought. Then a second kiss even further up her leg, stopped her from responding altogether. Her head tipped back, relishing in his lips against her, like silk against bare skin.

He kept moving closer, to her throbbing heat, becoming slower with every kiss and lick, the closer he got. And just when she thought he would finally, *finally*, put her out of misery he pulled back again and she groaned in frustration.

His chuckle in response was irritating.

He pulled her other leg up and repeated the painstakingly slow process, gripping her foot, pressing slow, wet kisses down her leg. He was right though. She enjoyed his praise. Her body felt overwhelmed with pleasure. By the time his mouth was next to her pussy, she was shaking with need.

He kissed everywhere, *but* there. Then he started vigorously licking the inside of her thighs, in wide wet licks, alternating between legs. She couldn’t understand how he continued to find ways to drag this out.

“D-Draco.” Hermione stuttered as another slow, tender lick came so very close, but not close enough

“Granger.” He whispered against her core, and he cunt clenched in response.

“Please.” She exhaled. “Please.”

“Keep begging.” He said

“Touch me. Please.” Hermione begged, all care of dignity flung out of the window.

“I am...” He kissed the soft skin next to her cunt.

“You know what I mean.” She felt completely wound tight, her body sensitive to every graze of his nose or swipe of his tongue.

“I will...He licked the soft skin on the other side of her pussy. "...Eventually." Her clit throbbing unbearably.

“Draco.” Hermione practically yelled.

“I *really* like hearing you say my name.” He murmured near her clit, his warm breath lingered heavily against her skin. She released a loud moan and she could feel the wetness drip down her opening.

He moaned in response. “I really like when you do that too.”

Without warning, he licked her roughly from entrance to clit but it was over too fast. Her thighs attempted to squeeze around his head, keeping him there, but his grip wouldn’t let up. He kept her legs spread wide.

“Fuck.” She panted hard.

“Is this what you wanted, Hermione?” He murmured against her clit again, causing her walls to flutter. He licked her again slowly this time from, tongue wide.

“Gods yes.” She cried.

He slid her backwards on the marble surface, pushing her thighs to her chest, his grip tight. “Do you like my tongue on your cunt?” His head leaned back between her legs.

“Yes” she sputtered. She thought the previous position was exposing, but this angle, this angle was so much more...

Spreading her cheeks he gently kissed her ass.

“And what about here?” Before she could get an answer out his tongue swirled the rim of her hole sending a spiraling wave of sensation throughout her entire body. She didn’t know that kind of intensity existed.

He moaned against her and she could feel herself become wetter because of it.

She had never experienced this kind of euphoria before and she hadn’t even come yet.

His tongue swirled around her clit again, slowly. Everything was so tedious with him, he took his time everywhere he touched her.

Completely nude, displayed on marble, spread wide, she had never felt more exposed.

A shiver went through her as his mouth became aggressive. Kissing, sucking, lapping her up like she was the bowl of cream.

“You’re doing so good.” His voice was ragged and breathy.

“Gods above.” She breathed as his words washed over her. He continued feasting on her and one his hands moved up her body while the other danced around her entrance.

Two fingers, wet with her slick, massaged her and teased her. They did not enter her which drove her mad.

She let out a moaning whine.

“You taste so fucking good.” He rasped.

“Please...” she trailed off as his mouth went back to work. “Please, Draco.” His fingers still danced around where she desperately needed them to be.

He lifted his head, eyes glassy as they locked on hers,

“Beg me.” He commanded.

Her mouth opened with rushed words, “Please.” She said emphatically. “Please, I need you.”

“Oh yeah? Say it again.”

“I need you. I need you.” She chanted as she rocked her hips forward searching for friction.

He tisked. And her mouth fell open. The bastard was successfully torturing her.

His mouth kissed against her clit. “You’re dripping wet, baby.” His fingers moved a centimeter forward. “Such a needy little cunt.”

“Fuck.” She yelled as he licked her hard, tongue wide against her clit.

“Let it out. I wanna hear you scream my name as I make you come.”

She never let herself be too loud in bed, it was uncomfortable and vulnerable and never truly necessary previously. But she couldn’t stop herself from crying out as he pressed his long fingers deep inside her. It was a guttural reaction that a distant part of her was self conscious of.

“Just. Like. That.” He said as his fingers thrust inside her punctuating each word. Hermione was sure she had been poisoned now. This was a strange alternate universe where she was being forced to receive the greatest pleasure of her life from Draco malfoy. It was so good. Deliriously good.

"Oh my...Oh my..." She moaned loudly, again and again as his mouth and fingers worked her into oblivion. That desperate need that had been building since they were knocking knees in a muggle bar's leather booth, was beginning to crash over her. It was building and growing, swirling to something so high she didn't know how to let herself receive it all. It was too much. His fingers didn't stop their pace as he licked in between words.

"You're doing so good, Hermione." He sucked on her clit. "Let me take care of this dripping wet, pretty pussy of yours. Come for me, come all over my tongue." That sent her right over the teetering edge, and what a long fall it was. "I want to taste all of you. Don't hold back."

He licked her as she rocked against his face, her fingers gripped his hair tightly. The balls of her feet pressed into his shoulders as her pleasure came down in a torrential downpour.

It was an overwhelming surge in her body as if filled with internal fireworks. Burning sharp and hard, then twisting into long drawn out waves of pleasure that pulsed throughout her body.

Her body was as languid as melted honey.

When their eyes met, she couldn't control the wide smile that overtook her face. Her cheeks flushed with heat. A mixture of embarrassment and joy. She'd never experienced anything like that in her life.

He returned the smile, with one of his own mouth watering wide smiles and it was Hermione that moved first this time. His lips were swollen and wet, but she didn't care. She locked her lips with his and he pulled her close. He kissed her like he'd never be satisfied. As if licking her had just made him hungrier.

Draco lifted her out of the tub. He set her on the wet floor and wordlessly summoned her black lacy bra. With a snap of his fingers he put it back on her wet body.

"Are we all done?" Hermione laughed uncomfortably. "Are you kicking me out now?"

"Hardly." Draco said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "We are just getting started, but I missed out on taking your clothes off, so this is my consolation prize." He tugged her hand towards the bed. They fell together in a tangle of twisted limbs.

The breeze from the open balcony doors sent goosebumps down her spine as she sat atop him. His hands ran up and down her thighs as she slid down his thick cock. She hesitated

"You can take it." He said, his smug smile in place. She sank down on him, and the hissing moan that he left vibrated through her whole body.

"What a fucking lucky bastard I am." He said as his hands cupped her bra covered breasts, brushing her hardened nipples underneath the fabric with his thumbs. She leaned into his touch, laying against him, as she rolled her hips. The friction had her moaning again, that pulsing need returned rapidly. She rocked faster kissing his chest, his neck. His hands moved down her back, kneading her ass. He rolled his hips, pressing hard into her core.

“Oh my gods.” She breathed over his mouth. She meant to kiss him, but their mouths lingered open, semi-connected by slow brushes of their lips and shared breath, as they moved together. Hermione became more frenzied. It felt so good to be touched like this, so fervently.

“Slow down.” Draco kissed the corner of her mouth, then ran a tongue across her bottom lip.

“I don’t care if you come fast, I’m going to come again too.” Hermione breathed, licking his tongue.

“I’m not about to come.” He placed a strong hand at her hip bone, forcing her to slow her movements. “I want it slow.” He set the pace and Hermione was tempted to complain that it was too slow for her, but then their mouths met and between their tongues licking the other’s in long wet motions, the slowness became everything she didn’t know she needed.

They moved together, his movements fluid against her, he rolled his hips as she rocked against him, his hands touched her everywhere. He unclasped her bra, coming lose, but still sandwiched between their bodies.

“Will you sit up for me?” He whispered into her ear as she kissed his neck. “I want to see your face this time while you come.” G *ods*. His words made her feel everything so intensely. It would surely be the death of her.

She lifted herself up slowly, and her bra stayed off. He tossed it next to his nightstand.

Grey eyes slid up her body, soaking up every inch of her.

She swallowed hard and began moving.

“Slow.” he said, eyes locking onto hers. It surprised her how quickly the motion built that coiling need inside her. His breathing began to get faster as did hers. They moved together, his hands running up her thighs. “Good job.” he said breathlessly. “You’re doing perfect.”

And it was his winded voice that really changed things for Hermione. That heat built rapidly, with every slow stroke of her hips. He thrusted inside of her with impossible control. “Don’t take your eyes off me.” He grunted. She could feel the tension in his muscles, the hazy look in his eyes, and with a few more movements of her hips, he thrusted hard, deep. He thrusted again, this time he held tight inside her and she came undone again. This time it was as if champagne filled her bloodstream. Bright bursts of pleasure cascaded through her. She fell forward in a breathless heap. He lifted her chin with a firm grip.

“Get on all fours. Now I want it fast.”

Chapter 4

The warmth of Draco's body woke Hermione. She was on her back tucked into his side and ridiculously comfortable.

Last night was so...sooo...so perfect? That sounded too personal.

It was fun? She couldn't remember laughing that much recently. She settled on fun. It was very fun.

She hesitated for a moment before opening her eyes and shifting slightly towards him.

Draco Malfoy. Draco bloody Malfoy.

He was so beautiful even in his sleep. His tattooed arm draped across her chest. She could faintly see the Dark Mark underneath the other tattoos. He hadn't covered it entirely, just camouflaged it. A lithe dragon curled around his forearm, breathing fire directly over the dark mark. There were daffodils and morning glory flowers, a mixture of star constellations and lines of loopy script across his shoulder, too small for her to read from this angle. There were more and she wanted to study all of them, but her bladder was screaming at her. She sighed as she gently moved his arm aside.

As she stood Malfoy shifted onto his back throwing an arm over his eyes.

"Do you want breakfast?" He mumbled, still half asleep.

"I'm just using the loo. Go back to sleep." She whispered.

"I'll be waiting." He yawned.

Once in the bathroom she looked at herself in the mirror, her brows flew to her hairline. She was covered in purple, red bruises. He kissed and sucked her everywhere and her body was covered in the evidence. She met her own eyes in the mirror. She was smiling. Like a giddy little school girl.

Over Draco Malfoy. Gods dammit.

The same person who bullied her. The same person who bullied all her friends.

The terrible boy who called her names and fought for Voldemort. Who turned into a man who still showed off his death eater mark...

"I hate muggles and more than anything else I hate you.

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

Do you get it now?"

As if a bucket of ice water was dumped upon her she was hit with the fact that she had slept with Draco Malfoy. Her whole body froze with the realization.

A part of her knew that she wanted to sleep with him because of Ron.

Initially the idea of fucking the one person Ron hated the most satisfied that pettiness, but right now she was flooded with heavy shame.

She was not a vindictive person. She was not a woman who could do random one night stands.

Especially not with someone like Malfoy who would inevitably be spreading around all the details to his friends, bragging about his conquest of fucking her.

She'd forgiven the Malfoy family a long time ago, for her own sake, but that didn't mean she could trust him. She didn't know anything about who he was as a person.

The way he'd seen her so vulnerable, she'd begged for him to touch her...

She was going to be sick.

Of all the ways to work through her lingering symptoms of PTSD and trauma, fucking a death eater was not on the list. Oh gods... her mind healer would likely commit her St. Mungos,

How could she be so bloody stupid...

What exactly did she expect to happen when they woke?

For him to say, "Well I think you're disgusting, but I had a nice time shagging you Granger, want to meet my mum for tea in our parlor room where you were tortured?"

Shame crawled through her like a hot flame and her chest tightened to a near impossible point. Panic reared its ugly head. Her pulse raced, loudly thumping in her ears.

She frantically looked around the obscenely large bathroom. At some point did they put their clothes back on again? The flashes of everything that occurred from the night before made her eyes fill with tears.

She sank to the floor, the cool marble sending a shiver up her skin.

Last night raked through her like a broken shard of glass and a loud sob broke through her. She clamped her hands over her mouth while she shook, too many emotions were beginning

to overwhelm her. She needed to leave and she needed to pretend that this had never happened.

Get out. Get out. Get out. Get out.

You're Hermione fucking granger. You can figure anything out.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Scrambling up, she grabbed the only article of clothing still in the room. Malfoy's pressed white shirt, somehow still wrinkle free. She resized it to fit like a dress, she could send it back to him. Or actually she'd probably burn it instead. She could leave everything else behind, all she had to do was grab her beaded bag and run far away.

Draco Malfoy mentally listed the restaurants he knew that had the best breakfasts. He wondered if Hermione would want to explore the city or if she-

His whole body stilled as he heard a gasping cry through the bathroom door.

That was the sound of a woman with *regret*.

His ears started ringing and his fists balled tight before he forced himself to relax them.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He screwed up. He shouldn't have approached her. *Fuck!*

Perhaps he could say something, anything to help ease her pain, to apologize for what happened. Not that he regretted it, but if she did, he'd take the blame.

He'd take on all of her guilt if it made her feel better about fucking an ex-death eater.

The ugly truth sank into him like an anchor on his chest.

Draco Malfoy enabled an evil man to kill countless men and women. He almost got their friends and family killed. And when things really mattered he was a coward.

Of course she fucking regretted him.

There was nothing he could do to fix this because it didn't matter what he did, he'd never escape who he was on the inside. That rotting part of his soul that would never heal, because of Voldemort, would always be there. Taking the dark mark took part of him in return. It changed him, in a way he could never reverse. Of course she regretted him. She should regret him.

For a brief second he hoped she'd say goodbye. Maybe they could be cordial. Maybe they could be friends.

He was just about to throw himself out of bed, when the door opened slowly.

He didn't dare move. Maybe she'll stay. Maybe she'll crawl back into bed...

The thought quickly shattered as he heard the front door open and then close with a soft click.

He didn't bother using a silencing charm when he grabbed a pillow, placed it over his face, and screamed.

Chapter 5

Theodore Nott had seen many bizarre things in his life, but the sight before him had to be in the top five. Perhaps even top three.

Hermione Granger, best friend and client, stood before him in her doorway, like a deer caught in wand light.

Theo stared at Hermione. Hermione stared at Theo.

He arched his brow.

He floo'd into her living room for their regular Friday morning coffee chat, but she hadn't been there. He'd begun making coffee hoping she'd snuck out early to grab breakfast, but as she barged into her flat he knew without a doubt, she'd not been coming back from breakfast. It was *very* clear what kind of night she had. But he was a devious bastard and wouldn't pass up the opportunity to fuck with her.

"Where are you coming from?" Theo examined her from head to toe.

Hermione looked completely guilty, which tickled Theo to no end.

"You slept with someone." He tilted his head, furrowing his brow. There was something off. Something that didn't quite make sense. The puzzle pieces were there in front of him, but it's like they wouldn't fit together.

"What makes you think that?" Her voice rose an octave.

He rolled his eyes. "If it wasn't for the guilty look all over your face, I suspect it's because you're wearing a shirt that looks like it was haphazardly resized into a dress...were you drunk when you did the spellwork?" He wrinkled his nose. "That aside, your smeared makeup, the state of your hair, the marks on your neck, and..." He waved the air in front of his nose. "Yes, you were drunk, because I'm certain you bathed in wine."

Hermione swallowed, shifting on her feet.

"Your first walk of shame? It's not a big deal." He pursed his lips. "What I don't understand is how you're wearing Draco Malfoy's shirt. He's not even in town right now." Theo pursed his lips.

"What?" Hermione practically shrieked.

Theo gestured to her shirt. "You're branded dear."

She glanced down at the horrifying transfigured concoction. She still didn't see what he saw. He sighed, tapping his collar. Her face became crimson red as she saw the glowing D.M. monogrammed initials.

"I wonder...." Theo crossed his arms, tapping his chin. "Do you think Draco donated that shirt to a charity shop? Do you think the bloke you slept with bought it second hand?" His mind worked trying to come up with a plausible explanation. Theo just saw Draco wearing something awfully similar.

When Theo met Hermione's eyes all of his theories were tossed aside.

His mouth fell open.

"You." He couldn't form a complete sentence. His mouth closed again. Then reopened. "Slept with." He was a fish out of water gasping for air. "Draco."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears as she spit the confession out. "Yes."

He opened up his arms and she rushed to him. He rubbed soothing circles into her back.

"We don't have to talk about it." Theo reassured her.

"Swear it. Swear you won't tell anyone." Hermione squeezed him.

"I swear." Theo said, gripping her arms and forcing her to look at him. "But if you need to talk about it, I'm here. Let me prepare a hangover potion while you take a nice shower."

"I want to go to bed." Hermione said glumly.

"Okay that's fine, but perhaps after a nice long bath." Theo smiled politely.

"Do I really smell that bad?"

"Yes, like sex and alcohol." He stopped, squinted tilting his head. "Is that a strawberry leave in your hair?"

Hermione's shoulders sagged.

Theo gazed down at her clothes, "Do you want me to fix this shirt into a proper thing for you to wear?"

"No!" Hermione snapped. "I'm burning it."

"Oh alright then. I'll find the matches."

Chapter 6

Present Day

Hermione Granger knew it would be unproductive and inappropriate for her to shriek. So she kept her jaw clamped tight as she watched Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini sit down at the conference table.

Something akin to betrayal trickled through her. It wasn't Harry's fault per say. He didn't know they'd slept together. He'd probably assumed that Hermione was mature enough to look beyond Malfoy's past mistakes, but she was in fact not mature and Harry should have said something to her.

Malfoy didn't look in her direction. He sat down next to Harry, nodding politely. Blaise sat at the head of the table near Pansy.

It seemed like Malfoy's attendance was entirely expected.

Pansy and Theo were completely silent. There were no surprised greetings. "*oh Draco, what a nice surprise to see you mate.*" Nope, just polite nods. Had they told him? Had they decided to invite him because he was in the photos? They were his friends first after all.

Harry cleared his throat.

"Hermione, I've updated Malfoy and Zabini on the official case, but they'll have their own questions, of course. The first thing we want to do is get some more specific information about the timeline of events."

What had Zabini done after the war? Hadn't Hermione read in the Daily Prophet he studied law or something? Was he Draco's solicitor? Did she need a solicitor?

"Should I contact a solicitor?" Hermione shrieked. Theo jolted next to her. "Gods Hermione, are you alright? It's like you've seen a ghost!" She shot him a glare.

"If you'd like." Harry shrugged slowly. "But we aren't discussing anything legally binding. We want your collaboration."

"If Malfoy has representation I think I should have it too." Draco's eyes stayed on the file in front of him.

Pansy was the first to understand Hermione's confusion, and placed a soft hand on her arm. "Draco and Blaise are the investigators, Hermione. They're the ones you're hiring." She gave Hermione a look that said keep your mouth shut.

“Oh.” Hermione glanced at Blaise. “You’re not a solicitor?”

“No.” He said with a friendly smile. “It’s a shame we are meeting under these circumstances, it’s nice to see you Granger.”

She nodded politely as her mind spun with the new information. okay, Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini worked together as personal investigators. *Her personal investigators.*

When Hermione didn’t respond, Blaise continued. “We’ve read the official case file. But we understand there were things excluded for privacy’s sake. Which was the right call with the way the department is going. What can you tell us about the other person involved in the pictures?”

Hermione swallowed, willing her voice to remain neutral. “I honestly don’t remember much unfortunately.” *Lie.*

“Were you drugged?” Blaise leaned forward taking notes.

“No, just very drunk.” But it was as if all that alcohol had the opposite effect on her from that night. She’d thought about Draco Malfoy a few times over the years sure, but after that night it was as if every image had been burned into her brain. She’d gotten extremely good at dismissing the thought of him.

“*What’s Draco -*” Dismiss.

“*How do you think Draco-*” Dismiss.

If her friends spoke about him she’d nod, file the information away, and dismiss his existence again. It the only way to deal with the annoying compulsion her brain had developed.

“And when exactly did this happen? There isn’t a date on file.”

“Oh um it was about 4 weeks after I had moved, so I think June 5th.”

Malfoy suddenly jerked, knocking his knee into the table. Hermione looked at her lap. *June 5th. June 5th. June 5th. Hermione chanted it like a prayer.*

“Oh that’s a funny coincidence.” Blaise chuckled writing down the date.

“What is?” Hermione watched Malfoy’s jaw tightened as he continued taking notes. *Still not looking in her direction.*

“Oh that’s Draco’s birthday.” Blaise shrugged. “Just interesting is all. Anyway-“

The doors burst open with a loud bang. Draco was on his feet in an instant, wand drawn. Harry and Blaise followed quickly after him.

“Hermione.” Ron said, storming through the room. “Gods Hermione, I just heard the news.”

Harry looked at Hermione apologetically. Pansy gagged.

“Ron.” Hermione furrowed her brow as he barreled towards her. “What are you doing here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” Ron pulled her into an awkward hug while she still sat in her chair. Then squatted before her placing his hand on her knee.

“I stopped into the Auror’s office yesterday to grab lunch with some of my mates. Everyone couldn’t stop talking about you Hermione. They said you were hysterical.” *Lovely.*

“That doesn’t explain why you’re here.” Pansy lip curled with unfiltered disdain.

“Because Hermione is one of my oldest friends and friends show up for each other in their time of need. Why are you here, Parkinson? Oh right, you’re just here for the publicity.”

“Ron stop.” Hermione shook her head. “Just sit down.” She would deal with him later.

Pansy huffed, muttering something about a hex, crossing her arms.

Ron sat at the end of the table opposite Blaise. He was wearing a slightly oversized blue suit, his hair brushed back. Ron surprised everyone after the war. His work ethic improved tenfold and his business boomed because of it. After a while he took business classes and reinvested his profits from the joke shop. Now he ran a successful investment firm working with small wizarding businesses.

“Let’s just continue please” Hermione kept her eyes on her hands. This was a room straight out of her nightmares.

“Okay.” Blaise cleared his throat. “Can you explain the events of the day, I understand they’re of sensitive nature, so you don’t have to explain those details, just your movements of the day of and thereafter.

“Um okay.” Hermione’s throat went as dry as sand. “I regularly go on a walk in the evenings to a nearby muggle restaurant. So that day I went, I had wine and chips. I met someone there. We went to his place afterwards. And then I left the following morning.”

“And have you had any contact with him since?”

“No.” Hermione forced the words out. The universe was punishing her. It was forcing her to confess her misdeeds in front of everyone.

“Where was his location?” Blaise didn’t look up from his notes.

“That’s irrelevant.” Malfoy spoke for the first time. He sent a silent look in Blaise’s direction. Blaise nodded, “Oh right. Okay, last question from me. Do you believe the bloke would do this?”

“No.” Hermione, Pansy, and Theo all said at the same time. Blaise’s eye narrowed at his fellow slytherins. Then his face changed. His eyes widened slightly and then he became the perfect image of nonchalance. *Great. Everyone knew now.*

"So let me get this straight, you had a date with some muggle and now you're being blackmailed? What evidence do they have?" Ron leaned forward, hands clasped on the table like he was in a business meeting.

"They sent me photos of my activities with the man." She didn't bother correcting his assumption of the man being a muggle.

"What activities? Like dinner and dancing?" Ron's eyes furrowed. God he was so stupid sometimes. Before Hermione could say it in a polite way Pansy jumped in for her.

"She fucked someone Weasley, gods are you that thick?"

Ron's jaw tightened. "I'm not dumb, Parkinson. I was confused. I value clarity in my communication. Hermione doesn't do one night stands. It didn't make sense, is all." He looked back at Hermione. "I'm furious someone would use those kinds of pictures against you. No one deserves to see you like that. Have you traced the magic? Usually there are magical signatures or traceable elements. What about fingerprints or DNA evidence? There has to be something. I want this bloke dead."

Hermione could see Draco sit up straighter out of the corner of her eye.

"Yes, Ron, I've checked for all of those things. The charm used on the photo wasn't very complicated magic. I could have done it in my sleep. The original photo is the one that would have the magical signature, the copies are useless." She shook her head. "The magic that is used to erase the tracking for the post are however advanced work."

"Someone still has the original then?" Ron's eyes went wide.

"Yes, unfortunately." She said looking down at her hands again. "Can we continue?"

Harry spoke, "Yes, that's why the next piece of this is crucial. We plan to survey the area for the next few weeks. That's Malfoy's area of expertise."

Malfoy slid a blank piece of paper in her direction. "We need you to give your daily schedule, your work schedule, your—" Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out a stack of stapled papers. "Already done." He still managed not to look at her as she handed him the information. It annoyed her to no end. It was like he was set on not seeing her eyes.

Her anger began to stew. She crossed her arms. "As you can see, I'm quite busy."

"And extremely vulnerable. You do the same things on each day of the week." He said as he scanned through her schedule. Was he even reading it? How could he possibly know that with a few glimpses.

"She's a creature of habit Malfoy, don't attack her for it." Ron said. Hermione ignored the comment, but Malfoy's eyes slid to Ron, giving him a thunderous glare. Hermione braced for a violent outburst. From who she didn't know. Ron held his chin, arching his brow. Then Malfoy huffed a laugh as a devious smirk appeared.

"Got something to say, Malfoy?" Ron sneered.

"Just thought of something funny. Ask me about it another time." Draco shook his head.
"Like I was saying you're very predictable, which increases your vulnerability to being watched or followed."

"You think someone could be watching her?" Theo gasped. "Hermione, you need to move in with me immediately."

"Not yet." Draco responded, giving Theo his full respect by looking at him directly in his eyes. "We need to observe her regular habits until we have a baseline of the people she interacts with and see if there are any crossovers. We'll also be setting up a number of protection charms this week." He began to list a series of complex spells that they were to place on her neighborhood and home. It was nearly impossible to perform as nonchalantly as he made it seem. Either he was not taking this very seriously and had no intention of completing these in their entirety, or he severely underestimated the amount of work it would take to pull them off consistently.

"That's incorrect." Hermione spoke. And it came off more curt than she intended, but she was just proud she hadn't shrieked.

He looked at her for the first time then and the weight of his stare zapped across her skin like static electricity.

"Excuse me?" He titled his head.

"You're wrong." She sounded like the snobbiest snob who ever snobbed and she laid it on thick. "The charms you're considering are not going to work layered together like that. When you use protection charms they have to be layered in corresponding structures. Otherwise they won't weave together properly, the geometric patterns will conflict with one another and cause weak spots in the structure of the charm. They're easily disabled after that. You'd go through at least two hours labor of getting it up, for it to fall apart two hours later. Especially when you're doing the amount of layers necessary for the size of geography."

He narrowed his eyes in disbelief, shaking his head a bit. And you know what? She found it quite irritating.

"I'm very aware of how difficult they are to maintain, unless you—"

"She would know Malfoy, she wrote a book on it." Ron spat and then looked to Hermione supportively. Her skin became itchy, having Ron defend her.

Draco sighed and leaned back in his chair, in a way only a rich, spoiled, Slytherin could, a smug expression settled on his irritating face.

"Oh you mean, Protection Charm Uses and their Counterparts? Specifically the chapter on stability factors and I quote." Malfoy began to mock her voice, "In certain cases there are exceptions for advanced protection charm stability. While you can maintain near perfect stability for these ambitious protection charm combinations, see the list below, it is only done so with runic stones. When layered together with ancient runic stone(s) and reinforced regularly- weekly and sometimes on a daily basis, the structures can maintain their dignity."

Hermione's mouth gaped open and then snapped shut as he continued quoting her. *Word for word.*

"The ancient runic stones act as a conduit and disperses the power equally amongst the geometrical magical wavelengths. The runic stones are rare and quite expensive; it is not recommended, nor is it necessary to use for regular protection charms. In addition to the upkeep of such complex charms, they require a level of precision best achieved by professionals."

He paused. "I happen to be, said professional." His arrogance was outstanding.

Hermione blinked at him. "Impressive." Harry nodded at Malfoy.

"Draco I didn't know you could read." Pansy gasped, only making Blaise and Theo laugh.

"You read my book?" Hermione scowled. He just corrected with her own text. Her own bloody text! Was this some kind of sick joke? Some kind of way to get back at her after all these years after his letter? Then she realized something even more important than he'd said.

"Anyway, like I was saying--"

"Do you have runic stones?" Hermione shrieked and sat up straighter. Pansy jumped next to her. "Hermione does Draco always have this affect on you? Should I invest in some ear plugs?" Hermione threw her arm against pansy's chest in loud thwck. "Ow."

She couldn't hide her excitement. She'd only seen one in her entire life, when she was granted permission by a private collector when doing research for her book. For this kind of charm work he'd need at least three. Three stones! Each runic stone was unique as it was beautiful.

"I'm in the process of procuring them." He replied, his eyes had stopped meeting hers again.

"So no you don't have them." Ron huffed beside her. "Way to get her hopes up. What do these stones cost? I'll pay to help you afford the lot."

Draco gave Ron an icy sneer. "If you have to ask, you can't afford it."

She ignored them both. "Can I see them when you do? Where are they coming from? The Irish? The Swiss? The only one I've seen was in Romania. How many of them are there? You'll need several for--" Theo patted her arm gently. They were all staring at her. Malfoy looked momentarily amused, a small tug at his lips came and went in a blink of her eye. But it was all she needed to be reminded of where his lips had been.

On her breasts,

her neck,

her legs,

her-

Her cheeks flushed. “Ahh I’m sorry. Please continue.” Hermione focused on breathing slow breathes.

“Some details of the security plan will not be disclosed to anyone. Blaise and I have certain protocols in place to prevent any potential leaks of information.”

“And you just expect us to trust you?” Ron scoffed.

“I don’t expect anything from you Weasley. Nor do I answer to *you* in any capacity.” Malfoy said it so casually and calmly Hermione knew it irritated Ron more than if he had shouted it at him.

“We are all here for one reason, to protect Miss Granger.” Something fluttered through Hermione’s chest.

“Yeah that’s right I *am* here for that. To protect her from the likes of you.” Ron glared back at Malfoy. Malfoy looked...bored.

“Ron, just stop.” Harry exasperated. “Stop interrupting.” Hermione could feel the tension coiling off Ron. He definitely expected more support from the room as he looked around, especially Harry. Their relationship still seemed to be strained.

“We can be finished.” Blaise said. “We need to do a security check of your home wards. Is it okay if we come over later this afternoon?” Hermione nodded. “Alright. Other than that we want you to act normal for the next two weeks, you won’t even see us after today. Potter we will be in touch to connect with the Auror’s office.”

“And let me know what I can help with.” Ron said, sitting up straighter. “And I’ll pay for it.”

“Not necessary.” Malfoy said, dismissively.

“Can I speak with you Malfoy?” Hermione said much louder than she wanted to as everyone began to stand, but she would not consider it shrieking. She had simply projected her voice.

He glanced at her briefly and nodded.

Blaise was the first to leave, nodding his goodbyes. Pansy and Theo by Hermione both gave her affectionate squeezes, she knew they’d floo directly to her flat after the meeting. Harry hugged her and murmured, “Let’s meet at the pub soon and talk.” Notably he didn’t say anything to Ron as he left.

She stood at her chair watching Malfoy. He was like a statue, holding himself so stiff, but he wasn’t looking at her.

He raised a brow and that’s when she realized Ron had yet to leave. Ron stood next to her, his arms folded across his puffed chest.

“Ron, leave.” Hermione didn’t bother trying to sound polite.

“Hermione, I’m not-“

"I need to speak with him alone. Please leave." She gave him a look that said she meant it. Ron finally dragged himself away, but not before glaring at Malfoy for a long moment.

Even after they were alone, several minutes passed before either of them spoke. Hermione opened her mouth unsure what to say, awkwardly trying to piece together a coherent sentence.

"I didn't send you the threat, If that's what you're going to ask." He was looking down at the table with both hands in his pockets.

Hermione's eyes widened, she began moving closer towards him.

His head snapped up and something about his expression stopped her in her tracks.

Half a table apart, she fiddled with her bracelets.

"I never thought it was you." She said firmly. Something flashed across his face. Relief? Surprise? It was gone before Hermione could really analyze.

"Theo knows. And Pansy." Hermione swallowed guilt swirling in her stomach. He probably didn't want anyone to know.

"Theo knows?" Malfoy's head snapped up.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. He was at my house when I...arrived home and..." she looked away from him, guilt pounding in her chest. "Anyway. He knows. Pansy was there the night I received the letter and pictures. She recognized your tattoos and there was no way I could deny it after that. They're very... explicit." She said softly. "You can't see your face though."

"It's a charm." He huffed. "Yours." His keen eyes evaluated her from head to toe.

"What char- the picture blurring charm?" She brightened. Directly after the war to help protect her, Harry, and Ron from being photographed without their permission, Hermione had created a charm that blurred one's face in any photo. She patented it and shared it with the public, but it wasn't very popular. Most people wanted to be photographed. Ron never used it and hated when Hermione used it in photos of them together. Eventually she stopped using it as well.

"I use it almost every morning. It's brilliant."

Her cheeks warmed and she looked away from him.

"Are you okay?" He asked, his voice almost tender. And the way he asked, slammed into her with a force that knocked sense into her. The warring emotions of the last two days were threatening to make her come undone.

Her throat tightened and she closed her eyes briefly not allowing tears to build.

“I’m fine.” She sighed, crossing her arms.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “I don’t know why you’re being dragged into this, but I promise I will find out what is going on and let you get back your life as soon as possible.”

“Why are you apologizing?” She frowned.

He rolled his jaw, looking at her like the answer was obvious. She considered his words again.

“You think... you think this has something to do with you?”

“You don’t?” His words rippled with condescension.

“The pictures don’t even show your face, it’s blurry or non-existent. You’re not recognizable at all. Have you gotten threats as well?”

“I never don’t have threats coming my way, Granger. Everyday I have a death threat. Or did you forget that I was a former Death Eater?”

She bristled.

“I haven’t forgotten, but-“

“Clearly someone is finding a new way to blackmail me. They are using you to get to me.”

“Well that’s silly we aren’t even friends.” She threw her hands up. A mixture of something flashed across his face and she realized that sort of sounded offensive.

“Have you received any requests for money or assistance in special projects?” He continued with a cold mask of indifference.

“I get many of those. Most request my presence at charity events or my stamp of approval on ministry proposals. Nothing to do with you though.”

“I’ll look through them just in case.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“No one else knows. Only Pansy has seen the photos. No one... no now will know it’s you in the photos.” Hermione reassured him, but apparently that was the wrong thing to say because his eye roll was dripping with contempt and it pissed her off. None of this was her fault.

“What?” Hermione snapped. “Clearly you have something to say. So say it.” She moved towards him and he stiffened. He was the one acting like a scared little mouse now. Had she turned into some kind of snake?

“Do you really think I care about me getting recognized?” He didn’t mask his incredulity.

“I, I just assumed that you were worried about what people would say and I don’t know. This is really overwhelming.” She explained quickly folding her arms.

"You're the most vulnerable in this situation, Granger. You know what tabloids do to women in scandals like these. Even the most progressive media will trash you."

Of all the things he said, her last name bothered her the most.

"Granger is it? Or Miss Granger in front of the others? You can call me by a name you know."

"Like you said." His words were cold and hard. "We aren't even friends."

He turned to leave and she followed after him. He was almost to the door when she blurted

"Then let's be friends."

He paused and turned toward her. "Granger. I am here to do a job. I have no desire to be friends with you."

Damnit. She set herself up for that kind of hurt.

"Why not?" Her voice broke on the words and she hated herself for it. "Am I not good enough for your pureblood standards?"

He started towards her then stopped breathing heavily. They stared at one another for a long moment.

"Why did you leave that morning?" He said it so quietly she almost didn't hear him. In fact she took several breaths before it registered that he had asked her that.

Hermione's eyes widened in shock.

"What else was I supposed to do? I hadn't seen you in 5 years. I was massively hungover. I was embarrassed. You hate me Malfoy!" She practically yelled her defenses rising. She didn't think she'd have to explain herself, especially to him of all people. "What would you have done differently?"

He just stared at her, his piercing eyes searching hers for more answers. She broke eye contact first, perhaps he'd done her a favor during the meeting. Holding his stare was proving to be very difficult.

"I heard you in the bathroom. I was awake as you left without saying a word. Common decency is apparently lost on you." He said he turned to leave his hand on the handle of the door only a few moments later.

"Do you want to know what I was doing while waiting for you to come out of the bathroom?" He didn't wait for a response. "Considering where to take you for breakfast."

And then he was gone.

Hermione stood there for a long time before leaving the room and when she got home, it was only then that she realized she'd been wearing his shirt.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

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

Draco Malfoy had decided Hermione Granger would be the death of him. She had to be the most frustrating witch alive.

She wore his fucking shirt.

It didn't mean anything. Of course, it didn't. She probably didn't even remember it was his, but gods did he love seeing it on her, especially the fact that she monogrammed her own initials over his.

Draco considered himself a man of control, a man of boundaries. But right now he felt like he was losing all of it.

He'd royally fucked up by approaching her that night in the bar. It wasn't a surprise to see her there, he'd seen her come in regularly and always kept his distance. But there she was like the fates hand delivered her to him on his birthday. She was glowing from overhead light, looking angry as hell and completely gorgeous at the same time. It was a moment of weakness he now seriously regretted.

After Askaban he promised himself she'd never see him, but that night he was a selfish bastard.

That night changed things for him.

He couldn't control himself as easily anymore and he worked very, very hard not to be creepy but godsdammit that witch made it impossible. Her hair, her wit, her little stubborn glare, her drive, her eyes...

Now because of him, she was in danger. This was all his fault. If he'd just stayed sober that night...

Draco paced around his flat.

The secret flat no one knew about for work purposes. The secret flat that would be quite hard to explain. Fuck why didn't he just tell one person where he'd moved to....although he had a nagging suspicion a few people already knew where he lived. He didn't have any evidence yet, but he'd find what he was looking for, he always did.

He needed to go over to Hermione's flat, but he shouldn't be the first one to arrive.

He checked his watch. She probably hadn't eaten any lunch today and survived on coffees alone. He could see how uncomfortable she was this morning.

It was difficult for him too. This whole thing was a nightmare and then Weasely had to show up trying to be a knight in shining armor.

Speaking of which... Draco pulled up his magical laptop. He checked the wizarding message boards he'd been monitoring for the other project they were working on.

Activity was low today. *Interesting*. He'd speak to Potter about it tomorrow.

He sighed, pinching his nose. Anxious energy pulsed through his body like zaps of lightening...he needed to do something productive.

He'd grab lunch for everyone before the meeting. Draco wouldn't be able to handle Theo's hanger issues right now. Yes, Theo needed lunch. That was a great plan. See? He was completely in control.

From now on he'd create stronger boundaries and lean into the control he always found reliable.

He'd ground himself. He'd focus entirely on the job.

And under no circumstances would he be *creepy*.

He pulled out the wrinkled piece of paper from his suit pocket. The stasis charm on it stopped it from tearing, but he liked the worn look of it. He didn't need to read it, he'd memorized it the day he'd received it, but looking at the handwriting brought him peace.

It kept him sane on those long days in prison.

It kept him focused on his mission.

It made him feel worthy.

Rubbing his thumb over the loopy script, Daco closed his eyes and began to pray.

Chapter End Notes

Alexa, play Creep by Radiohead...

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

It was the shirt that would never die.

Theo had tried matches, Hermione had tried a fire-making spell, Theo took scissors to the damn thing. And one evening, when Hermione was a little high, she used an acid hex on it. *NOTHING*.

It was indestructible.

The only thing she managed to actually do was disable the glowing charm of the monogram.

Hermione had concluded the magic had to have been weaved into the fabric, which absolutely blew her mind. She only had a thousand questions about it and she couldn't find anything on this kind of material in any books. *And* it was as if the fabric was sentient to some extent... at minimum it could understand intent. When she tried using scissors the shirt reacted like she was cutting cement. But when she hand stitched her own monogram over Malfoy's initials, the shirt allowed it just fine.

So logically speaking, she couldn't just get rid of a rare magical shirt that probably cost a million galleons.

Hermione stared in the bathroom mirror contemplating what to do. If she kept it on and he recognized it he might be bold enough to ask why she stole and never returned it. If she took the shirt off it would draw more attention to the fact that she changed. It also meant she was admitting a certain level of power Malfoy had on her.

She would have to just risk it. She was keeping it on. Not because it was *his* shirt.

It fit her well. And it looked nice with the deep green skirt she wore.

Hermione solidified her decision, she couldn't take the shirt off. No that would make it look like she cared what Malfoy thought. And she didn't. Plus, he probably had fifty of these laying around his posh, snobby flat. He'd hardly notice this one.

“Hermione, I'm starving.” Theo called from the sitting room. “Where is all your food? What do you think she'll do to me if I summon a house elf?”

Hermione crossed her arms and tapped her heeled foot in the hallway. Theo had every cupboard wide open. She could admit she did need to go grocery shopping.

“Oh she looks adorable when she's mad, Pans.” Theo cooed, plopping down on her sectional. He waved his wand and shut all the cupboards.

“Did you both know Malfoy was going to be the P.I?”

“I didn’t know for sure.” Pansy shrugged. “Potter could have picked a number of investigators. I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not afraid of Malfoy.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “But it would have been nice to have a little warning!”

“You looked afraid of him when he walked through the door.” Theo frowned.

“I wasn’t afraid, I was...flustered.” Hermione sat near Theo.

“I’ll say.” Pansy winked, sitting in a chair across from them.

“I regret the day I told you two anything.” Hermione huffed

“I have been told the barest of details. Parkison knows more than me?” Theo gasped.

“It’s because I’m her best friend.” Pansy smirked.

“I’ve been friends with her longer.” Theo said.

“I love you both equally, or rather I *loved* you both. Apparently neither of you love me enough to tell me very pertinent information.” Hermione looked at her lap. “I’m going to need your support going through this. Especially when it comes to Malfoy. I don’t trust him.”

“Do you think he’s the one stalking you?” Pansy leaned forward. “Because if he’s trying to blackmail you I’ll cut off his balls, with a rusted, jagged-”

“Oh I’m going to be sick.” Theo grimaced.

“I don’t think he would hurt me.” Hermione said quietly. “At least I hope not...”

“Tell me again why you dislike him so much?” Theo’s brow furrowed.

“You know why.” Pansy wrinkled her nose, leaning back against the chair, crossing her long legs.

“Oh right. The letter.” Theo shook his head. “I’ve asked him about it and he seemed very disinterested in the conversation.”

“Because he hates me.” Hermione sighed through a clenched jaw.

“I think he’s grown a lot since the boy he was in Askaban.” Pansy said. “Just be polite, treat him like one of us. We all used to hear that blood purity shit daily.”

“I am polite! I asked him to be my friend.” Hermione frowned. “He said, no and that he’s just doing a job. He’s the rude one”

“Then just be professional with him.” Theo suggested. A knock at the door stopped their conversation.

Blaise and Malfoy walked through Hermione’s front door and the sight of having a room full of Slytherins made her smile. What a strange turn of events. Four purebloods and a muggleborn. The jokes could write themselves.

“I brought sustenance.” Malfoy said to no one in particular as he set down enough food to feed a dozen other people.

“How did you know I was famished, Draco?” Theo shot up from the couch. “You’re my very best friend.”

“Hey!” Pansy and Hermione said simultaneously. Pansy moved to the table as well.

“Besides them.” Theo shrugged while he piled food on his plate. “Why haven’t you invited us to come to your restaurant yet?”

“I haven’t gotten the magical floo permits approved yet.” Malfoy said, sitting down at the table. “My name doesn’t do well in those processes at the ministry.”

“Well the food is delicious.” Theo popped a chip into his mouth. “And these chips!”

Hermione’s mouth began to water. Gods she missed those chips. For obvious reasons, she stopped going into the restaurant and she’d craved it more than anything else the last four months. Well... not *anything*. She also hadn’t had sex in four months, which was another issue. She’d been on several dates, but nothing excited her.

Hermione finally got off the couch and joined the slytherins at her table.

She didn’t make eye contact with Malfoy when she spoke. “Thank you for bringing food.” She was aiming for professionalism, but it came out robotic.

“Alright now that dumb and dumber are gone we need to have the real discussion on how we are gonna fuck this stalker up.” Pansy said while stabbing her salad emphatically.

“I don’t think Potter is dumb.” Theo said. Pansy ignored him.

“And we also need to just get this over with.” Pansy gestured between Malfoy and Hermione. They both looked at Pansy. “You two fucked. We all know. No one cares. We never have to speak of it again, if you do not wish to, but we aren’t going to catch this bastard if we keep pretending it’s not Draco in those photos. This is an advantage we have that the stalker does not.”

Hermione’s cheeks were redder than her favorite wine.

“What?” gasped Theo dramatically dropping his fork. “I did not know this. I am hearing this information for the very first time right this second.”

Hermione couldn't help but laugh.

"Draco, are you going to act professionally?" Pansy's glare was truly more intimidating than a troll, and she looked beautiful while doing it.

Malfoy arched his brow. "Obviously."

Hermione was surprised with how unphased Malfoy was by this conversation. Then Hermione remembered that he fucks lots of witches. A one night stand, with or without a hypothetical breakfast option, was probably very normal for him and his friends- their friends she corrected, to discuss. She could also play it that way too. He would not ruffle her feathers. She was cool as a cucumber.

"And Hermione?" Pansy looked at her expectantly.

"Of course." Hermione smiled. She chewed on a crispy chip and moaned. "Gods these are so good."

Suddenly Malfoy looked frustrated again. Hmph. So much for professionalism.

"Alright." Blaise leaned forward. "We looked over your list of past relationships in the file you gave us. Great work by the way, very thorough. We're currently in the process of tracking their current whereabouts. We received Viktor Krum's list of recent locations as we were arriving, he was just in London last month. Have you had contact with him?"

"Oh yes. We had dinner while he was here." Hermione nodded.

"And do you have any reason to believe he'd try to blackmail you?" Blaise said.

"No, we aren't romantically involved." Hermione smiled. "Turns out he's gay."

"You didn't tell me that! Why is everyone keeping such juicy secrets?" Theo wagged his fork at Hermione. "Completely unrelated, can I have his floo information?"

Hermione shook her head. "I truly can't think of anyone who would want to hurt me. The threats I get are almost always anonymous, but occasionally they write their name and it's generally an older wizard, someone spouting blood purity nonsense." Hermione took a bite of food.

"What about that one guy?" Pansy's brow furrowed. "That wizard you danced with and then spiked your drink? Whatever happened to him? He was a creep."

"I filed a report with the aurors office, but didn't hear anything back." Hermione replied.

"Figures. That whole place is fucked. I don't trust anyone there." Pansy shook her head.

"We actually pulled that report too." Blaise pulled out the file handing it over to Hermione.

"Oh my gods."

“What? Is that the one stalking you?” Theo looked over her shoulder.

“No..it says he died a few days after he spiked my drink. A drug overdose.”

“What a pity.” Malfoy said.

Hermione looked at him for the first time. His eyes dropped to her lips and stayed there for a beat before he looked back at his food. *Don't let him ruffle your feathers. Don't let him ruffle your feathers.*

“Do you really think I’m being followed and watched?” Hermione set down the file.

“Honestly depends on the kind of stalking this person does. If they took the photos of you and Draco, it seems they’re at least tracking your location. What I’m not sure of is how they could get passed Draco’s security systems.” Blaise turned to Malfoy.

Malfoy’s jaw worked. “I’m currently trying to figure that out as well.”

“Do you ever feel like you’re being followed?” Pansy asked.

“Sometimes I do feel like someone is watching me.” Hermione contemplated. “It’s not all the time. Just occasionally.”

“Can we see the original letter and envelope?” Blaise said.

“Oh and can we see the pictures?” Theo asked casually while clearing up the food.

“No.” Hermione and Malfoy said at the same time. They both avoided looking at each other.

Hermione summoned the evidence that she had put under stasis.

“That envelope looks very fancy.” Theo narrowed his eyes.

“That’s why I assumed it was a gala or a charity event invitation.” Hermione watched as Blaise carefully spun the silver envelope midair. He cast a few spells over it, rechecking Hermione’s work.

Malfoy leaned back in his chair, arms folded across his chest. “The handwriting on the note is different from the envelope.”

“I noticed that too.” Hermione sighed. “I think it’s a physiological maneuver. Using different fonts or scripts to confuse me. They’ve done this before”

“And you believe this person who wrote the note has done this before? Do you have those too?” Blaise gently placed the envelope on the table. Hermione summoned the letters she’d saved.

“I’ve thrown a lot of them away, ut they started to become more frequent in the last few months or so. Some aren’t even threatening, just very obsessive. Some are sent through muggle mail, others through the owl post. Some are typed on a computer, some are written by

hand. So I can't say indefinitely they're all from the same person but they all have certain commonalities."

Malfoy and Blaise looked over the letters.

"Like what?" Malfoy asked without looking up from the letter in his hand, his face growing more severe as he read.

"Well most are very angry. They tell me how I'm to blame for their problems. That I get too much attention. That I'm actually very stupid. Then normally after an angry letter I get a handful that are apologetic and then a handful that are sexually explicit."

Malfoy's face was full of accusation. "And this is the first time you've reported it?"

"I was doing my best to not give this person attention." Hermione gritted.

"This one repeatedly says 'I miss you.'" Blaise held up one of the letters.

"That one came through the muggle mail. So did the pictures and letter threatening to release them." Hermione swallowed.

"We need to be monitoring every piece of mail you receive moving forward." Malfoy said.
"Each piece will get examined and all anonymous packages need to be opened in front of me or Blaise."

"Alright." Hermione said, pursing her lips.

Blaise set down the stack of letters. "We need to discuss your schedule." Blaise continued.
"It's... a lot."

"What he actually means is you need to cut out everything nonessential." Malfoy leaned back in his chair.

"I did that already." Hermione blinked. "Plus, you said just this morning that I'm to act normally."

"She's about to release a new book and we need her to be front page news." Pansy said.

"This book is already proving to be controversial." Theo added. "As her literary agent I had to negotiate several times with her publisher because there are *certain* groups wanting to ban her work. Please do not cancel any more events."

"What's your book about?" Blaise asked.

"Muggle born witches and wizards. A guide to help them in the wizarding world, how to mesh magical and muggle lives. Things of that nature." Hermione said. She was so very proud of this book. "I'm going to do the events outlined in the file." Hermione was certain about that. "With or without your support."

"Okay." Blaise said slowly. "If you're set on this schedule, then we need to consider the locations more carefully. You have a book launch party next Saturday at Flourish and Blotts, we don't have the time to make the shop as secure as we'd like. Can you push it back?"

"No." Hermione, Theo, and Pansy said together. Blaise's brow arched. "Do you lot do that often?"

"No." They said again. There was a small tug at Malfoy's lips that Hermione didn't mind seeing. He was so relaxed around his friends.

"You can do it at my restaurant." Malfoy said. "I have great wards already in place and I can reinforce them easily. Plus we have top of the line muggle surveillance."

"You use muggle surveillance?" Hermione found this fascinating and a bit surprising.

"Yes, a mixture of magical and muggle produces the best results." Malfoy held her stare.

"That's nice." Hermione swallowed. "And yes, that's very kind of you to offer. Thank you."

"Okay, that's one figured out." Blaise said, scratching head.

"The other locations can't be changed. We are under contract with several of these places, plus the marketing has been in place for months. Moving the book release party is fine, because it's a personal event. But we are still scheduled to go to Flourish & Blotts for a meet and greet book signing later in the month. So get those protection charms in place quickly." Pansy commanded.

"And the halloween party Hermione and I host together is not changing." Theo said emphatically. "That is a tradition we can't give up and the wards at Nott manor are better than Hogwarts."

"Speaking of your personal schedule. You said all of it was necessary... why are you still having coffee with Weasley next week? And who do you go to lunch with every Wednesday?" Malfoy's brows seem permanently furrowed in frustration.

"How do you know my schedule so well, Malfoy?" Hermione arched a brow.

"I'm a quick study, Granger" He looked at her expectantly.

"I still have coffee with Ron because we are friends." Hermione gave him a tight smile. "And actually my lunch date is with... your mother." She huffed a laugh.

His genuine surprise warmed Hermione's soul. *Ruffled feathers mother fucker.*

"You have lunch with my mother, every week?"

"More or less." Hermione looked at him with smug satisfaction. "Because we are friends and we both volunteer for several of the same charities."

"Narcissa loves Hermione. It's obnoxious. I used to be her favorite." Theo pouted.

Malfoy's perplexed expression stayed put as they continued hashing out the details of her book tour. After which Malfoy lifted a suitcase and placed it on the table.

"We'll be placing surveillance inside your house too." He glanced at her while pulling out the smallest camera she'd ever seen.

"So I don't get any privacy?" Hermione wrinkled her nose.

"You don't have any right now it seems." Malfoy said, pulling out-

"Is that a gun!" Pansy yelled. Hermione's eyes were wide as saucers as Malfoy handled the weapon with perfect ease. "Yes, it's for Granger."

"I don't know how to use a gun!" Hermione and Pansy had moved away from the table, arms wrapped around one another.

"Then I'll teach you how." Malfoy said. "And you need to start carrying this around." He flicked open an all black pocket knife.

"This is a side of you I had no idea existed." Theo whistled, eyebrows raised. "I don't know whether to be impressed, scared or turned on."

"It's one of many ways we use to protect our clients." Blaise said, taking the handgun. "And the surveillance won't be on at night in your bedroom, so you will have privacy. We'll be placing a loud noise charm so if there are loud noises, we'll be notified."

"Blaise and I will take turns monitoring you for the next few weeks." Malfoy looked up at her with the knife in his hand as Blaise held up the gun.

Hermione could see why they were both in this field. They were both intimidating and full of muscle. She certainly shouldn't be noticing how handsome they both looked holding the weapons.

"I had no idea this is what I was hiring." Hermione's eyes had only grown wider. "Don't leave the gun in my house until I've had proper training." She shook her head clearing her mind of the path it was taking.

Her investigators walked through the house setting up the cameras. They took security notes and explained the measures they wanted to place within the next few days and then finished the inspection with placing a few extra protection charms.

Hermione felt a lot of things after their discussion and excused herself to make tea.

The reality that someone had progressively stalked her scared her in a way she'd never felt before. She didn't like feeling this weak or vulnerable. At least with Voldemort and the Death Eaters she could recognize her enemy. Hermione could have walked past her stalker a hundred times and she'd never know it. It chilled her blood.

Malfoy cleared his throat and she jumped.

“How long have you been watching me?”

“Long enough to know you make terrible tea.” He chided.

She glared at him.

“I’m procuring two of the runic stones tomorrow… If you’d like to come with me.”

“Oh.” Hermione smiled. “Yes, absolutely. Where are you picking them up from? I’ll meet you there.”

Her whole body was on high alert as he approached her, reaching over her shoulder he turned the stove burner lower. “The water is too hot.” He said as he stepped back. A rush of his scent flowing over her, reheating her blood.

“I think so too.” Hemione blinked. “I mean.. okay…thank you.”

“The seller of the stones is very private and won’t disclose the location until tomorrow morning so I’ll take you there.

“Oh.” Hermione managed. “Alright. Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll pick you up at noon.” Malfoy smirked, his eyes flicking up and down her clothes. “Nice shirt, by the way.” Then he was gone.

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That night Hermione slid open her nightstand drawer. She pulled out the photos of her and Malfoy. Some were blurry, like they were caught in motion.

Her on top of him. “*Slow.*”

Him taking her from behind. “*Get on all fours. Now I want it fast.*”

Something fluttered low and deep in her stomach. She reached into the nightstand a second time and placed her vibrator between her legs. Looking at the series of photos, she rocked her hips.

Him on top of her, mouths open in lazy kissing.

“*You feel so good.*”

“*You’re doing so good.*”

“*Come for me, Hermione.*”

She breathed hard into her pillow as she imagined him touching her, licking her, kissing her...she came undone.

The orgasm crashed into her at the same time the regret did.

Each night that she gave in to the compulsion to come to those memories the more she hated herself, because the worst kind of betrayal was self betrayal.

She'd keep it polite. She'd be professional. But she couldn't forget how he felt.

She couldn't let her guard down around him or let her feelings grow into something worse.

So she repeated the words he'd written until she fell asleep.

*"I hate muggles and more than anything else I hate you.*

*I hate you. I hate you. I hate you."*

*"I hate muggles and more than anything else I hate you.*

*I hate you. I hate you. I hate you."*

*"I hate muggles and more than anything else I hate you.*

*I hate you. I hate you. I hate you."*

## Chapter End Notes

Alexa, play Granite by Sleep Token

On another note, I made a TikTok account under januarydevine to post updates and edits about the story. I'm not great at making tiktoks yet, so bare with me as I learn the ropes.

Thank you again for all your comments, kudos, and support!

## Chapter 9

“You’re driving us?” She gawked. Hermione assumed that when Malfoy said he’d pick her up, he meant apperating to the location, but there he was dressed in an all black suit, leaning against a very expensive black car.

“Yes.” Malfoy opened the door for her.

“You’re driving an Aston Martin?” Hermione’s father would not believe her once she told him about this. Her father loved cars and growing up he taught her a thing or two about them. She didn’t remember much because she traveled by magical means so frequently, but she would recognize an Aston Martin anywhere because it was her father’s favorite car. A car he spoke about constantly. To his patients, to his friends, and to practically any strange that would listen.

“It’s fast.” Malfoy gestured for Hermione to get in the car.

“Wow. This is absolutely wild. My father is going to be beside himself with jealousy!”

“Get in the car, Granger.”

She moved into the all black interior. Placing her beaded bag on her lap, she pulled out her muggle cell phone and snapped a picture as Malfoy started to drive.

The snapshot of the dashboard and steering wheel included Malfoy’s hand on his thigh. Yes, she’d save that for herself too. She texted the image to her father, *“A colleague of mine offered to drive me to a meeting. Can you believe this?”* He replied instantly. *“Can they come pick me up too? I am so happy for you, but completely sad for myself! I saw one last month, but it wasn’t long enough.”*

She smiled. “Where are we headed?”

“Oxford.”

“Alright.”

Hermione considered the length of the drive and exchanged her phone for a red pen and her latest manuscript. Malfoy repeatedly glanced sideways at her and she ignored him.

“Is that your book? I thought it was finished.” He finally said.

“It will be a published book in six months or so. I always have something in the works.” She kept her eyes on the papers in front of her and underlined a few lines she needed to rewrite.

“Do you always do your own editing?” Malfoy said.

“No, Theo used to be my editor, but now Luna Lovegood is. I just like to be thorough.” She circled a large chunk of material that she didn’t quite liked.

“And what’s this one about?”

“The history of Azkaban and how it should be completely redesigned. I outline several ways the magical community is quite behind in their treatment of prisoners. There are prison models for rehabilitation in Norway I admire.”

“That’s going to certainly ruffle a few feathers.” He chuckled. “If I turn the music on, will it bother you?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Malfoy pressed a button on the sleek radio system.

Hermione stilled. Slowly, she glanced at Malfoy. His thumb tapped against the steering wheel to Whitney Houston’s *“I’m Every Woman.”* Hermione’s mouth fell open when he started to sing and bob his head along to the music. Was there a possibility that she poisoned and hallucinating?

“I didn’t know you listened to muggle music.”

“I really like her.” Malfoy bounced along to the song.

“Whitney Houston?”

“Fantastic voice.” Malfoy nodded. “I have a lot of her songs on my playlist.”

“And when did you start listening to Whitney Houston?”

“I started listening to muggle music in Azkaban actually.” This completely surprised Hermione.

“They allowed that?” Hermione suddenly had a dozen questions about his experience, but refrained.

“I requested permission and it got approved. It seemed like they thought the muggle items were a sort of punishment.” He shrugged and then *Rump Shaker* by Wreckx-N-Effect played next.

“How do you create your playlists?” Hermione turned in her seat, huffing a laugh.

She wanted to grab her phone and record Malfoy so she could send it to their friends, but she refrained from that as well...

“By decade.” Malfoy replied. “I started in the 1920’s and have worked my way through each year’s discography. Sometimes I stick with a decade for a while because the music is so good. I was stuck in the 80’s for a long time. Currently, I’m listening to the years 1990-1993.”

“You haven’t listened to anything past 1993?” Hermione was completely amused at this side of Malfoy.

“No and don’t spoil it.” He shot her a heartless glare. “I’ve been doing it with movies too. Currently in 88.” *What’s Up* by Four Non Blondes began to play and Hermione couldn’t help but sing along. She listened along to the music while attempting to do her work, but mostly she sang quietly to the music as a string of songs played that Malfoy knew all the words to. They sang together through REM’s *Losing My Religion*, Aerosmith’s *Janie’s Got a Gun*, Nirvana’s *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. She kept her eyes on her work the entire time, but when Whitney Houston’s *I Will Always Love You* began to play Hermione couldn’t pretend to edit any longer and placed her work back in her bag.

“This is her best song.”

Malfoy sent her a look. “Don’t talk while she’s singing” He turned the volume up.

Hermione couldn’t even be offended because she wanted to sing along too. Malfoy didn’t hold back as he belted the lyrics. Neither of them were great singers, but Malfoy could carry a better far tune than her. She loved listening to his dramatic singing. When the song was over Hermione turned the volume back down.

“Did you know that Dolly Parton wrote that song?” Hermione ginned.

“What?” Malfoy’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.” Hermione

“You’re wrong though. Her best song is ‘I Have Nothing.’”

“I like that one too.” Hermione chuckled.

They continued that way for the rest of the drive and Hermione reasoned she was allowed like the way she felt. This wasn’t self betrayal. This was just...joyful.

When they arrived in Oxford Hermione was buzzing with excitement. She could hardly believe she would see two runic stones today. Malfoy led the way into the History of Science Museum where they were privately escorted to a small room.

An older woman with dark red hair greeted them upon arrival.

“Draco.” The woman grinned, shaking his hand with two of hers.

“Annabeth.” He returned her smile. “This is Hermione Granger.”

Hermione shook Annabeth’s hand. “Lovely to meet you.”

“You must be the special reason Draco has me hunting all over the place for these stones.” She winked at Hermione and walked them over to the stones. “I believe we will have the third stone soon as well, but these two are in fantastic condition.”

Hermione's chest warmed with awe. It was the only way to describe it. Complete and utter awe. And notable she refrained from shrieking.

One was the size of her palm and the color of slate. Ancient rune symbols carved in a curved pattern outlining the stone into a swirling pattern in maroon coloring. The second was much smaller, a polished round stone with a small blue sapphire embedded in it and had only a few runes on it. Her eyes began to water. They were so incredible.

"Well Granger." Malfoy arched his brow knowingly.

Hermione smiled at Anabeth. "I have some questions."

Two hours later Hemione was back in the car with Malfoy. They had the boxes of runic stones carefully secured and she couldn't wipe the silly grin off her face. Everytime Malfoy looked at her his lip would tug slightly, but he refrained from teasing her.

Even if he had she doubted it would bother her. She was in a fantastic mood.

"Are you hungry?" Malfoy reversed out of the parking spot with one hand on the steering wheel and she suddenly wondered how driving became so attractive.

"Yes, I am. Although I don't think we should leave the runic stones in the car." Hermione smiled at the posh Slytherin. "Have you ever been to a Mcdonalds?"

"I'm supposed to speak into this box?" Malfoy wrinkled his nose.

"Yes." She forced herself not to laugh.

"Hello, I'd like to place an order for Mcdonalds."

Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth and watched with glee as Malfoy ordered the fast food. "Don't forget the Oreo Mcflurries."

Fifteen minutes later they sat in the car eating french fries and cheeseburgers.

"This is quite good and somehow also a little rubbish at the same time." Malfoy said as he grabbed more fries. "The Mcflurry however is a quality invention."

"Dip your fries into it." Hermione demonstrated. "It's a combination you'll never know you needed." He narrowed his eyes. "Are you trying to trick me witch?"

"No." Hermione laughed. "It's really quite good." She ate another dipped in ice cream.

Malfony finally obliged her and his eyes widened as he chewed. "You're right."

"I usually am." She grinned. "Thank you for buying my dinner."

"Anytime."

“Speaking of.” Hermione wiped her mouth with a napkin. “We never discussed your fee as an investigator. The runes themselves...” She blew out a breath, looking at the roof of the car trying to calculate an adequate amount for three runic stones.

“You’ll pay for nothing.” He shook his head. “This is my fault.”

Hermione couldn’t believe that she saw Draco Malfoy nervous...uncomfortable?

“It’s not anyone’s fault, Malfoy except the person who took those pictures and threatened to share them.” Hermione wanted to reach over and pat his hand, but yes, she refrained from that too, opting to squeeze the napkin harder instead.

“It’s my fault...If I hadn’t...” He trailed off and clenched his jaw. He looked up at her with a hard gaze. “We won’t discuss this further. You’re not paying for anything.”

“Okay.” Hermione would mostly certainly bring this up with Blaise, but for now would feign concession.

“Would you like to practice shooting your gun tomorrow?” Malfoy reached for his drink at the time Hermione reached for a fry and their fingers brushed. A quick heat tickled up her arm, pebbling her skin.

“I have breakfast with Ron in the morning, but afterwards I think I can spare a few hours. I still can’t believe you bought that thing for me.”

“What’s the deal with you two?” Malfoy’s voice was polite, but Hermione could tell it was a forced politeness. “Why did you two breakup?”

“Do you want the long answer or short answer?”

“Long, of course.”

“After the war he wanted us to date seriously immediately, he even spoke about getting married, but dating and marriage were the last things on my mind. I needed to find my parents. I wanted to curl up and grieve my childhood in their arms.” Her throat tightened painfully as she spoke. “I wasn’t interested in ignoring what we went through and that’s what it seemed like everyone else wanted to do. Harry began working immediately as an Auror, Ron became obsessed with his business and making tons of money. I think they expected me to jump into the chaos of the ministry, but I was still a girl. I felt lost. The three of us still met up regularly, but we had separate lives and drifted apart.” She released a deep exhale.

“Anyway, a few years later Ron asked me out on a date. I still felt lost. I had been seeing a mind healer for years at that point, and after discussing it with them, it seemed like a step in the right direction. Like I was allowing myself to be vulnerable again.”

“Did you stop feeling lost?” She met Malfoy’s grey eyes and her stomach fluttered in response.

“No not really, but our relationship was good at first, He wanted more and I couldn’t give it to him.”

“More?”

“He wanted to rush everything. He wanted to call me his girlfriend right after our first date. Which I said no to. I made him court me properly. I think he took it as a challenge and it made him try harder, but once we moved in together it all fell apart. Then I was the one wanting more.”

“And what did more look like for you?”

“More emotional maturity. Even just conversations about my hobbies and not just his. I felt a little stuck, until I realized after an argument one night where he got really upset with me that I could just leave.” She shrugged.

“Why are you still friends with him?”

“It was hard at first, he felt caught off guard when I broke things off, but after a month or so he asked me if I meant it when I wanted to stay friends with him and I said yes. He was fine after that. And we *are* better as friends. He’s nice to me as a friend.” Hermione leaned against the car seat and paused. “I’d like to be your friend too.” She said quietly.

“Friends,” He rolled the word on his tongue like he’d never said it before. His intense gaze was unnerving.

“Yes.”

He stared at her for a long moment before looking away. “No.” He said flatly and turned away from her. “Are you done with this?” He gestured to the trash.

“What?” Her shock made her words shrieky. “Draco!” Hermione’s irritation drummed through her chest. He tensed, but didn’t look at her as he banished their trash with the flick of his wand. They were quiet for the rest of the drive. *Fuck him.* Hermione was so sick of trying to be cordial with him. He insisted on putting an awkward wall between them. Or perhaps it was more. Perhaps his hatred of muggles made it impossible to be friends with her. She would force his hand in the only way she knew how.

When he pulled up to her flat she said, “Truth or dare.”

His head slowly turned towards her, eyes narrowed. “Really?” He was not amused.

“Yes really.” Hermione nodded. “Truth or Dare.”

“Truth.” He said coldly.

“Why don’t you want to be my friend?” Hermione crossed her arms as her anger flared hot.

“I changed my mind, dare.”

“You can’t just change your mind!”

“I just did. Dare.”

“I dare you... to be my friend.” Hermione jutted her chin out.

“Fine.” He said as he exited the car.

Malfoy opened Hermione’s door, once she was out she faced him. “You’ll really be my friend?”

“Yes, you’re allowed to call me your friend, I won’t call you mine.” He gave her a smug smile.

“You little dirty cheat.” Hermione scoffed

“You didn’t specify.” He shrugged moving towards the other side of the car.

“Goodbye, Granger.” He said as he got back in the car.

“Bye friend!”

Hermione stood in front of her flat waving as he drove away. And she couldn’t help but wonder where he parked that thing, there was certainly no good parking for an Aston Martin where he lived.

## Chapter 10

Draco Malfoy knew he could not blame lack of control on what he was currently doing.

Or rather listening to.

It was a conscious decision.

And yes, it was creepy.

If he had spent one more minute in that car with her he would have kissed her. And if he would have kissed her he would have fucked her.

Being stuck in that small space with her seemed like a good idea this morning, but all he could smell was her vanilla coconut shampoo.

He couldn't stop stealing glances at her while she sang with him.

He couldn't stop staring at her throat when she swallowed ice cream.

He could have listened to her talk about anything for the rest of the night, but not without touching her.

And she wanted to be *friends*.

He couldn't fathom only being friends with her.

He breathed hard as he listened to Hermione cum over the audio surveillance in her house. It flooded his body with a sharp ache in his cock.

*Fuck this. Fuck being friends.*

He picked up his muggle cell phone and tapped on her number.

“Hello?” Hermione breathed. “Who is this?”

“This would be your private investigator.” He smiled.

“How do you have my phone number?” He could tell she was trying very hard to regulate the sound of her voice.

“I know lots of things about you.” He replied. “Have you just been exercising?”

“Um, well hello to you too...*friend*.” She emphasized. “And yes, I was...exercising.”

“Truth or dare, Granger.” He hummed into the phone.

Hermione paused and then eventually said, “Truth.”

“What kind of exercises were you doing?”

“Legs workouts.”

“That’s a very sensitive area.” Draco leaned back in his chair.

“Truth or dare, Malfoy.” She rushed.

“Hmmm. Truth.”

“What is the script on your arm? The tattoo.”

“That would be the prayer I have read every day since Askaban.”

“I didn’t know you were religious.”

“It was necessary for my sanity.” Draco replied. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“I dare you to continue working out...with me on the phone.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He whispered.

“I... I....” She stuttered. He knew that a pretty blush would be creeping up her cheeks right now.

“Are you brave enough to follow through on the dare or will you admit defeat?” He challenged.

“Fine.” She said curtly. “I will workout.”

“Do you want me to give some encouragement while you workout? That’s what friends are for right?”

“You said you wouldn’t call me your friend.”

“Perhaps I’ve changed my mind...” He paused. “Actually, I could fancy a workout myself, Granger. Would you mind if I worked out with you?”

She breathed hard into the phone. “What kind of workouts will you do?”

“Pushups.” He said and he didn’t try to be quiet as he unbuckled his belt.

“Alright.” She murmured.

“Start your workout.” He spoke slowly. “Make sure you breathe properly. Don’t hold your breath.”

“Okay.” Her voice rose and Draco began stroking his cock. Oh shit, he was going to cum fast.

“What are you thinking?” He asked breathlessly. “Long or short workout?”

“On the shorter side I think is best.”

“Me too.” He breathed as he picked up speed.

“Can...can...you see me?” Hermione said in short panting breaths and he moaned as his whole body throbbed to the sound of her voice.

“Do you want me to see you finish your exercise Granger?”

She released a long noise. “Whatever you think is best...for support, friend.”

He let out a chuckle as he flicked on the monitors and pressed the button that allowed video access to her bedroom. “I didn’t know this was the kind of friendship you had in mind, Granger. If I would have known I would have been friends with you a long time ago.”

He was unprepared for the sight of her spread wide in nothing but an oversized t-shirt, a vibrator pressed between her legs.

He needed to figure out how to get one of his t-shirts on her. Perhaps she’d sleep in it and let him watch her again. “I’ve missed this view.” He whined. Hermione moaned in response.

He couldn’t hold back his own sounds. Draco whimpered into the phone as he stroked harder and faster, listening to her mewling and gasping, watching her grind her hips into the toy.

““You’re quite good at exercising...so fucking good.” He bit his lip. “ How about we end things at the same time?”

“Yes. That’s a good idea.”

He breathed hard as he saw her inner thighs quiver. “Not yet though.” On one monitor he zoomed in on the toy between her legs, the other zoomed in on her face.

He suddenly loved being Hermione Granger’s friend.

“Five.” He said. “Four.”

She so moaned loudly he almost lost it.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” He hissed.

"Three. Not yet, don't finish ahead of me." He paused taking her in, her eyes clenched closed, her mouth opened and panting, the phone pressed against her ear. "Two." He murmured. "Almost there, almost there. You're doing so good."

They both breathed together for several long moments.

"One" He said. "Finish strong for me. Finish loudly."

And she did. And it was fucking glorious. His cum erupted from his cock against his stomach as he let out long hard breathes.

"Oh gods."

He moaned, throwing his head back. "My only regret is not being able to spread some of my... sweat on your chest."

"Fucking hell." Hermione muttered.

"Please call me anytime for exercise support."

"You're a good friend." She panted.

"Perhaps your best friend." His mind spiraled instantly. "Do you do this with your other friends?"

"No." She replied quickly.

"Good." Draco responded.

They were silent again for several minutes, just breathing together as they came down from the exercise. He would fall asleep with her on the phone if she let him.

"Goodnight Malfoy." She said quietly.

"Goodnight, Friend."

He was in the shower an hour later reliving every moment of that conversation a second time with his hand back on his cock, finishing just as hard the first time. Gods she was so beautiful. *And she wanted him to watch her.* That turned him on in a way it shouldn't considering how long he'd been watching her.

He decided he really liked the idea of being Hermione's friend. He would be such a fucking good friend she wouldn't know what to do with herself.

And then he'd be there to tell her what to do. Maybe he could make her beg for him again.

Draco remembered rather unfortunately that she'd see Weasley tomorrow.

*"He's nice to me as a friend."*

He could only assume that fucking twat wasn't nice to her when they were more than friends, which made him want to punch his fucking face into the ground.

Perhaps maybe he would. He wondered if Potter knew more about their relationship.

He'd have to watch her there. He'd switch shifts with Blaise and let him take the shift watching Hermione at lunch with his mother.

*His mother.* He still hadn't quite unpacked that one. Although it did make him feel less guilty in a way.

All draco knew was that he would not lose the opportunity of being around Hermione again. He'd make amends for every sin he committed. Even though he wasn't a truly religious man, he did believe in redemption because of Hermione Granger.

And he would indeed become her best friend.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your kudos and comments!! All your theories and reactions are giving me life. I love reading them. Thank you for taking the journey with me!

Hermione enjoyed her morning routine immensely. While she had mixed feelings about meeting Ron for coffee every three weeks, she loved getting to the cafe early and completing her morning ritual in this location.

Once her espresso was ordered, she sat outside on an unusually warm day for mid October and opened up the Daily Prophet. She had read it every morning since the war.

Her mind healer had encouraged her to set up routines that would help her feel normal after the war. One of the first routines she settled on was drinking coffee, eating breakfast, and reading the Daily Prophet.

And yet, five years after the Battle at Hogwarts she still had yet to see Draco Malfoy's picture there. In fact there was never even a mention of his name. Narcissa was featured from time to time with her charity work, and they'd simply reference Malfoy as her son, but never the words Draco Malfoy.

Hermione wasn't sure how he managed this or why-

"Hermione." Ron's voice startled her.

"Oh Ron." She stood, hugging him briefly. "You're early."

"Yeah, just thought I'd show up and grab a table, but you beat me to it." He sat across from her in a gray suit.

"Even after all these years, I don't think I'll ever get used to you wearing suits." Hermione giggled.

Ron arched his brow. "I think I look pretty good, you don't?"

"Oh, of course." Hermione replied. "You look very handsome." Ron preened at her words. Their waiter approached and took their breakfast orders, before he left Ron said, "Oh and put the check under The Brotherhood please."

"Yes, Sir." The water replied emphatically, tossing a small salute in Ron's direction before leaving.

“The Brotherhood?” Hermione furrowed her brows.

“You haven’t heard of The Brotherhood?” Ron asked incredulously. “Hermione, do you live under a rock?”

“Apparently, so.” She shrugged. “What is The Brotherhood?”

“It’s one of the oldest wizarding business societies.” Ron scoffed. “It’s an invitation only. You have to make quite a lot of money to be invited.” Ron smiled smugly.

“Wow, congratulations.” Hermione said. “And this being in this society allows you to pay for our breakfast?”

“Well, I’m part of the leadership team so that gives me extra perks. Ron leaned back in his chair as the waiter returned with their food. He saluted Ron again, “Tutela Hereditidas.”

“Tutela Hereditatis.” Ron nodded.

“You speak Latin now?” Hermione’s mouth dropped open.

“Just a little.” Ron laughed. “The Brotherhood’s business support is just one of many things we do for the wizarding community. We also have a charity to help mentor young wizards. One of the main tenets is to protect our wizarding legacy, teaching young men to value themselves and the choices they make.” He cut into his eggs, taking a large bite. “I could have used it when I was a kid. My parents didn’t have the time to give me that much attention with how many kids were in my family.”

“How is your family? How is Ginny?” Hermione hadn’t spoken to the youngest Weasely in a while, but she was busy as a quidditch star.

“They’re fine.” He shrugged. “Ginny’s a star of course.” He waved dismissive hand. He was not in a talkative mood today. She needed a new tactic.

“Well, that’s very impressive, Ron.” Hermione had no idea. “I’m so proud of you.” And a little miffed. Where was this version of him in school? She spent way too much time doing his homework and forcing him to study. “Is there a separate charity for female mentorship?”

Ron furrowed his brow in confusion. “No, but The Brotherhood is for men only so that wouldn’t make sense.”

“Oh why are women not allowed? Is there a Sisterhood version?” Hermione chewed on her toasted.

“No, Hermione.” He rolled his eyes. “Why do you always try to create debates like this?”

“I’m being genuinely curious.” Hermione said. As she considered Ron he looked a bit nervous.

They ate in silence for several minutes. Hermione contemplated her next move.

"How is the investigation going?" Ron wiped his face with a napkin.

*"This is your private investigator." Malfoy's words echoed in her mind.*

"Very well." Hermione reached for her drink, suddenly her throat was dry. "I've met with them a few times now. They officially set up some of the wards necessary to keep my house safe, still waiting for all the runic stones though to do more extensive protection spells."

"Hermione, I'm going to be straight with you. It's incredibly suspicious that all of Malfoy's friends are chummy with you." Ron leaned forward conspiratorially. "Pansy Parkinson would make a load of money for a scandal like that, right? How much do you pay her? Also your book sales would skyrocket. Nott would surely benefit from you having a scandal."

"I appreciate your concern, but I've been friends with them for a long time now. If they wanted to hurt me, they would have done it a long time ago." Hermione didn't want to waste her time talking about this. She needed to steer the conversation somewhere productive without being suspicious.

"Not Malfoy though. They're his friends Hermione, and you know that lot are always loyal to one another before anyone else." Ron sighed. "I just want you to be on guard, Hermione, don't let your kindness get in the way of your logic." He tapped his head. "Malfoy is untrustworthy. I'm gonna ask my friends at the Ministry to take a look at him. What's he charging for all this anyway?"

"I don't think that's necessary Ron. I'm currently figuring out an adequate amount to pay them. Malfoy seems set on not charging me at all."

Ron frowned. "That's decent of him."

"It is. Speaking of, can I ask for a favor?" Hermione leaned forward.

"Of course." Ron leaned closer. "What is it?"

"Malfoy offered to host my book launch party at a restaurant he owns, but the Ministry has yet to approve his permits for the floo network. I was wondering if you could check on it for me? Who are your ministry friends? Do you think they could help out? The party is only four days away and it would be a huge help." Hermione hoped that this would open up a slew of interesting topics to discuss.

"I'll do it for you, not him." Ron shook his head.

"He's not half bad you know." Hermione could hardly believe the words coming out of her mouth. Since when did she try to defend Malfoy?

"I'm not going to pretend I like Malfoy." Ron's eyes dropped to the table. "I will never forgive him. My brother died, Hermione. Fred will never come back. And like it or not Malfoy was part of that. I can't be friends with him. I don't know how you and Harry do it."

*"Goodnight, Friend." Malfoy whispered into her ear.*

"Harry isn't friends with Malfoy." Hermione frowned. "They work together, that's all."

"Yeah they are...and it's what caused our whole friendship to crack." Ron's frustration masked his grief, but Hermione could see the small signs of sadness Ron tried to hide. She'd known him too long for her not to notice.

"What are you talking about? Why didn't you tell me?" Hermione was completely taken off guard.

"I didn't want to talk about Draco Malfoy with you after everything he did to you. I saw how heartbroken you were after his letters from Askaban. I didn't want to really talk about Harry either and then our own relationship was strained and we were both so busy." He trailed off. "Look, Harry is doing some strange things at the DMLE. There are rumors he's working alongside Malfoy for secret projects, which everyone suspects is bad news. Harry does everything by the book, so he's working as a contractor on paper, but if you ask me, it looks like bribery." Ron grimaced.

Hermione scoffed. "Harry would never take a bribe."

"I don't know. Something's not right." He shrugged. "Just don't want them taking advantage of you. Not even Harry..."

"Well thank you very much for checking on that permit." Hermione reached over and placed a hand on his, giving it a little squeeze." "I really appreciate that."

"Oh, Hermione." Ron pulled away from her quickly like he was burned. "Sorry, I meant to tell you earlier." He grabbed his napkin wiping his hands. "I just wanted to let you know I'm dating someone, before it goes public I want you to hear it from me." He smiled, "Just don't want you to get the wrong impression about why I'm here. We're just friends."

Hermione blinked and then laughed. "Ron, I'm not hitting on you. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression." Then she smiled enthusiastically. "Wait, who are you dating? Tell me everything!"

"Daphne Greengrass." Ron said with pride. "Her father and I work closely together in The Brotherhood. He practically begged me to take her out, but she's the perfect match for me. I knew from the first date."

Hermione grinned even wider. "Will you be bringing her to the Halloween party?"

"Yeah, we'll be there." He nodded. "Are you dating anyone?"

"No, not really." Hermione ignored every thought about last night as she spoke. "Just been hanging out with my friends a lot."

"You should really put yourself out there more. Have you even tried dating anyone after we broke up?"

"Yeah, a few dates." Hermione said. "But I'm very happy regardless. My work is going well, my newest book is about to come out, I have a great support system. I'm satisfied on my

own.” Hermione internally cringed at her choice of words.

“If you’re happy then I’m happy.” Ron gave her that boyish grin she was all too familiar with. It was the only thing that seemed familiar at times. It faded quickly as his eyes narrowed, lips pursed tight.

“Malfoy.” Ron said curtly. “What are you doing here?” Hermione’s cheeks reddened as she met Malfoy’s gaze.

“I’m here to pick Granger up for our date.” Malfoy said casually.

Ron’s mouth fell open. “Hermione, you said you weren’t dating anyone.”

Hermione shook her head. “He’s referencing our plans for training with my gun.”

“A gun!” Ron straightened in his chair. “He’s got you using guns. Those blasted muggle weapons!”

“Yes, but it’s just for protection and it’s not a real date, it’s a date like our breakfast dates, just as friends.” She said in a rush.

“Granger and I are great friends.” Hermione’s cheeks heated to a temperature that certainly not normal or healthy.

Ron’s jaw tightened. “Hermione, please don’t reference our meetings as dates again. I don’t appreciate the gossip mill and that would hurt Daphne greatly.”

“Oh.” Hermione nodded, sufficiently annoyed with this situation and ready to leave. “I’m sorry Ron. Of course I wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings either. I’m looking forward to seeing you both on Halloween.” Hermione stood. “Thank you for the breakfast, or rather to The Brotherhood.” She mocked his salute then grabbed Malfoy by the arm and started her brisk walk to the apparition point in a nearby alley. “Hurry up.” She muttered.

She twisted into the alley and pulled Malfoy into an embrace.

“Where are we-” Hermione apparated them before he could finish his sentence.

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Being manhandled by Hermione Granger as they landed in Malfoy Manor was not exactly how Draco expected this morning to go. She let go of him so quickly he couldn’t even enjoy the rough embrace properly.

“Did you come here intentionally?” Draco furrowed his brow.

“Narcissa!” Hermione ignored him. “Narcissa!” She marched through the foyer with familiar ease. His brow deepened as he followed her through the hallway towards his mother’s

favorite sitting room. Hermione flung the doors open and suddenly Draco wondered if Hermione was about to attack somebody with the way she stormed through the room.

“Dammit.” She stomped. Literally stomped on the plush carpet.

“What is the matter, Granger?” Draco was becoming concerned. “Are you okay? Did Weasley hurt you?” She continued to ignore him and it pissed him off.

“Pilly!” Hermione shouted impatiently. What the fuck? Did she just summon his childhood house elf?

“Miss!” Pilly squealed with delight. “Pilly has missed Miss very much!”

“Hi Pilly.” Hermione kneeled down on both knees as Draco watched the scene with overwhelming confusion.

Hermione looked at Pilly’s lacy pink dress. “You look so lovely today.”

“Ahhh!” Pilly squealed again, placing small hands over her mouth. “Pilly is grateful Miss. Do you and Master Draco wish to have tea?”

“Pilly.” Draco said. The elf turned to him, her eyes wide with a small smirk on her face. “Yes, Master Draco?”

“Will you please explain what’s going on right now?” Draco was smart man and yet he didn’t understand anything at the moment.

“Pilly, ignore him, where is Narcissa?” Hermione declared.

“Don’t ignore me, Pilly! You’ve known me since I was born.” Draco scoffed. It might have even bordered on a whine.

Pilly looked between the two of them. Then turned to Hermione and responded. “Mistress is shopping.” Pilly nodded. “Mistress has been gone for two hours.” Hermione’s brow furrowed tighter.

Draco scoffed loudly. “Are you kidding me?” He was officially offended.

“Are you busy Pilly? Would you mind going straight to Narcissa and tell her Hermione needs a meeting with her at once?”

“Yes, Miss! Pilly is not busy for you.” Pilly finally looked at Draco. “Sorry, Pilly does not have time to respond to Master Draco. Pilly is too busy.” She disappeared with a pop.

“Granger, why are you summoning by mother via house elf?” Draco’s mouth dropped open.

“Shhhh.” Hermione paced back and forth in the sitting room.

“If you just-” He started, but the look on her face shut him up. He reluctantly accepted defeat and sat in a wingback chair with a frown. This is ridiculous. This was his home. Pilly was a

free elf, but still. Does his entire childhood mean nothing to her...

Pilly appeared shortly after with a wide grin on her face. "Mistress is finishing up and coming here quickly. Pilly will make tea and join too. Pilly cannot wait!" Pilly disappeared again squealing as she went.

Hermione kept pacing, muttering things to herself.

His mother appeared in the doorway a few minutes later and Hermione raced to her.

"Ron's dating Daphne Greengrass!" She practically shouted at Narcissa and then Hermione's face sank at his mother's expression. Narcissa smirked knowingly.

"How?" Hermione whined. "How did you know before me?"

His mother shrugged. Well, as much as Narcissa Malfoy could shrug. It was more like a gentle eye roll and a twitch of her shoulder.

"It's a talent. Come." The Malfoy matriarch grabbed Hermione's hand, "I'll tell you something even juicier."

They passed by Draco and sat next to each other on an ornate couch. Pilly popped into the room and set up tea. Once each of them had a cup, including Pilly, who sat delicately on the arm of the couch, Narcissa spoke. His mother never allowed him to eat on that couch as a boy, he folded his arms with an angry frown.

"They're not just dating...they're engaged." Narcissa Malfoy said with a smug smile.
"Tomorrow it'll be announced in the Daily prophet."

"Shut up!" Hermione gasped and Draco's eyes widened, whipping his head to his mother. He breathed a sigh of relief...He had only ever told his mother to shut up a single time and regretted it immensely.

"It's true." Narcissa smiled. "Found out yesterday evening, I almost owled you, but I didn't want to ruin the surprise."

"Gods. One of these days, I will find something out before you. I really, really thought I had this one." Hermione's shoulders sagged.

"You came here...so you could gossip with my mother?" Draco eyebrows shot into his hairline. "Seriously?"

"Oh hello dear, I didn't see you there." His mother smiled at him affectionately. "Would you like some tea?"

His mouth fell open and he looked at Hermione, she smiled shyly and fuck if it wasn't adorable as hell.

"There is another reason I like meeting Ron for breakfast." Hermione let out a little laugh.
"He's always willing to share gossip. It doesn't seem to matter though your mother,"

Hermione shot her a look. "Always seems to find out before me. It's unnerving. I don't like losing this much. I would have had more information if I hadn't been interrupted." Hermione glared at Draco.

"Okay, start from the beginning." Narcissa sipped her tea, and leaned against the couch. *Since when did his mother lean against furniture?*

Hermione followed suit, pulling her feet up and looking between Narcissa and Pilly. He slumped deeper into his chair as he watched Hermione recount her conversion with Weasley. *Word for word.* The three of them dissected everything Weasley said.

His mother grimaced. "He said that?"

"Pilly thinks you should have spilled your coffee on his head." Pilly frowned.

"Yes, it was comical. He begged to take me back for weeks and one touch of his arm and suddenly I'm begging for him back. He's so full of himself." Hermione shook her head.

"New money always is". Narcissa nodded. "They boast because they are very self conscious of being perceived as unsuccessful."

"That's when he told me he was dating Daphne and I quote, "Her father and I work closely together in The Brotherhood. He practically begged me to take her out, but she's the perfect match for me. Knew from the first date."

"That is very interesting. I heard the Greengrasses were having financial difficulties." Narcissa replied.

"I thought all the sacred twenty eight were wealthy?" Hermione sipped her tea.

"Most but not all. The Greengrasses fortune has always fluctuated." Narcissa set her tea cup down.

"Did he even ask Miss about her life? Her interests?" Pilly kicked her feet in petite frustration.

"He asked me if I was dating anyone." Draco perked up at this part.

"I told him no and he had the audacity to imply I needed to move on from him. As if." Hermione laughed and Malfoy felt the corner of his mouth tug. Her laugh was so genuine and carefree.

"Of course he did." Narcissa shook his head. "Daphne must be trying to secure a future for herself. It's admirable. She's a tenacious young woman" Her lips pursed. "That is, if he's as rich as he says he is. I wonder how far Weasley's money goes? For some pureblood families it's tradition for the future wife to inspect her betrothed vaults to guarantee they'll be secure in marriage." Narcissa smiled devilishly. "I checked Lucius's, but it was more for tradition, not because I didn't believe him. And it makes sense that her father clutched onto Weasley. He is a pureblood after all. New money is always so easy to manipulate."

"And Pilly thinks he is quite stupid." Pilly nodded. Hermione chuckled. "He has come a long way from our school days, but yes, sometimes I wonder how he's gotten this far. I always forget the Weasley family is a pureblood family." Hermione said. "But it seems he also has The Brotherhood to help him with money. He said "Tutela Hereditatis." To our server today and had our meal paid for. Perhaps he does that on his dates too." Hermione shrugged.

"He said what?" Draco's brow furrowed.

"Tutela Hereditatis." Hermione repeated. "It's latin for—"

"I know what it means." Draco stood abruptly. "I have to go. I'll be back in an hour." He looked at Hermione. She'd be safe here. He knew that, but he still felt conflicted leaving her here.

"Will you be alright?"

Her eyes softened. "I'll be just fine."

"Go, Draco." Narcissa shewed him away like this wasn't his home too. He wasn't sure he liked the two of them together like this. They made a formidable pair. And it intimidated him more than he liked to admit.

An hour and ten minutes later Draco reappereated into the manor. He walked towards the sitting room and stopped in his tracks as he heard his mother's bellowing laugh. His breath caught. He hadn't heard her laugh like that since...since when his father made her laugh well before the war... He stepped quietly up to the opened door, staying just outside of sight.

"I wish you would have recorded that. Oh my goodness. What a delight that would have been to see." His mother wiped tears from her eyes. "I didn't know you and Draco were on speaking terms?"

Draco's stomach clenched.

"Did he not tell you?" Hermione asked. "I hired him as a private investigator."

"No he did not tell me that." Narcissa's voice made draco clench his jaw. Shit. He'd pay for that.

"Oh my gods!" Hermione shrieked. "I did it! I just told you information you didn't know!"

Narcissa laughed again, though not quite as loud. "You did my dear. Your first win. I'm very proud of you."

They both sipped tea and then Narcissa spoke. "And you two are?" Her voice trailed off.

"We are getting along now that he agreed to be friends."

Draco smirked. *Yes, quite good friends.*

"Friends?" Narcissa repeated the word suspiciously

"Yes, friends." Hermione's cheeks had a delicious flush to them that made Draco want to kiss her.

"How's your father?"

Draco's face dropped as he saw Hermione's expression. She was more than sad...it was devastation written all over her features.

"He's alright." She said quietly. "I still feel so guilty. We both miss her so much. It's unfair. And then when I think about it too long I get angry all over again." Hermione began to cry and Draco stepped forward but stopped midstep. His mother pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Sweet girl." Narcissa patted Hermione. "I've said it before, but I'll say it again. It's not your fault."

"Never Miss's fault. Miss is kind." Pilly began to cry. "Miss is my friend."

Hermione sniffed as she pulled away from his mother to grab hold of Pilly's hand. "It's okay, Pilly. Please don't cry."

"If you cry Miss, Pilly will cry in solidarity." Pilly sniffed.

Draco waited a few minutes before walking through the door with a loud knock.

"Sorry I'm late. I got busy."

Hermione batted away tears.

"Will you two be staying for lunch?" Narcissa's venomous stare made Draco swallow.

"No." Draco said. "We have a date, remember?" He said with satisfaction as Narcissa's head swung to Hermione. Pilly squealed, clapping with tiny hands.

"It's not a real date!" Hermione rolled her eyes. Pilly's shoulders sagged. "Pilly must go now. Bye Miss. Please visit Pilly soon." Pilly squeezed Hermione's arm and popped away.

"I'll just need to use the lavatory before we leave." Hermione exited the sitting room and as soon as she was gone Draco turned to his mother.

"I always wanted a daughter, you know." Narcissa smiled at him like a snake about to strike. "But then I had you." Her smile dropped as she sighed dramatically. "And she's so smart Draco." She continued. "So much smarter than you."

"I'm aware Mother." He said. "And I understand you're upset with me, but I couldn't tell you. Client confidentiality."

Narcissa laughed. "Oh just wait till I change my will."

"What I don't understand is how you couldn't tell me you've met with Hermione Granger every week? For how long?"

"Several years now, but Draco I did tell you. Or at least I *tried* to tell you. Anytime I brought her up you said I wasn't allowed to speak about her. I stopped because you were so stubborn about it." Draco considered this. His mother had occasionally brought Hermione up, but...

"Draco." His mother's voice changed to the tone she only used when she commanded his full attention. "You need to be careful with her. She's finally getting back to a good place."

Narcissa let out a slow breath, quieting her voice.

"Hermione obligated both of her parents before the war. She erased herself from her parents memories completely. When she went to find them she spent every day searching for them for over a year. Once she restored their memories, with perfection I might add, her mother didn't want her old life back. She begged Hermione to take away the restoration, which we it know doesn't work that way. Her mother never forgave her for what she did and her parents divorced shortly after that. Her father chose her, but her mother doesn't speak to either of them anymore."

Disdain rolled through him in hot waves. Hermione was every good thing in the world. How could her mother turn away from that?

"Alright. I'm ready." Hermione stepped through the doors. "Oh actually can we stop by my flat first? I'd like to change my clothes."

Draco considered the outfit she had on, navy blue trousers and a green jumper, she was beautiful, but he wasn't going to argue.

"Of course. I'll apparate us this time." He would enjoy it this time, take his time holding her close, instead of being flung into the ether like she did to them earlier.

"Oh we can just use the floo from here. The manor is connected to my house." Draco turned to his mother again in complete disbelief.

Narcissa gave him a tight smile, moving towards Hermione in a warm embrace. "Thank you for the surprise visit my dear." She rubbed Hermione's back. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thank you Narcissa." Hermione squeezed his mother back.

Narcissa moved gracefully over to Draco and pecked his cheek. "It was good to see you too, I suppose."

"Really?" He arched his brow.

Hermione had already moved to the fireplace and dropped the floo powder in. With a small wave she disappeared. Draco practically ran after her and they collided on their way out into a heap on her living room floor.

"Why did you try to tackle me?" Hermione huffed, pulling herself up from the ground.

"I think it's strange you're such good friends with my mother." He said brushing his pants off.

“I think it’s strange you’re friends with Harry.” She said, accusation dripped in every word. Accusing him of what he wasn’t sure...Draco fire back.

“I think it’s equally strange you’re friends with Theo and Pansy.” He stepped towards her.

“I think it’s equally strange that your restaurant is in my neighborhood.” She moved towards him, hands fisted at her sides.

“I think it’s incredibly rude that you’ll go to breakfast with Weasley and not me.” Draco breathed hard, closing the distance between them. Hermione’s eyes dropped to his lips and his hand brushed her fingers, a jolt of electricity wound down his spine.

“I think it’s incredibly weird your breath smells like muggle toothpaste.” She whispered, her brow furrowing.

“Should I leave?” Blaise’s voice made them jump apart. He stood in Hermione’s doorway with an enormous vase of white roses and a small package.

“No.” Hermione and Draco said together.

“These were on your doorstep.” Blaise set them down. “Take a whiff.” Draco moved towards the roses, making sure he didn’t touch Hermione again. The smell hit him hard.

Coffee. Vanilla. Strawberries. Champagne.

“Fuck that’s strong.” Draco plugged his nose stepping away.

Hermione leaned down towards the flowers, her pupils dilated as her nostrils flared. She clamped a hand over her mouth, before moving away.

“Amortentia.” She coughed. “The flowers are soaked in Amortentia.” She waved her wand, masking the strong aroma. “If these flowers were to be left out in a room that would be enough amortentia to leave anyone who inhaled it long enough to become completely deranged for an incredibly long time. They’d be willing to do...” Her brows furrowed. “Anything without their consent.”

Blaise pulled out his wand. “The package also had your name on it.” Blaise waved his wand in a figure eight motion creating a barrier around the package and once it was secured he opened the lid. Draco had already pulled his wand out, reading himself. He held his breath, looking at the distance between the door and where Hemrione stood. Calculating how to jump in front of her if necessary.

The lid slid off and...he released a small breath. No explosion. The relief was short lived however as Hermione’s eyes began to water.

“Dear, Mudblood Whore.” She whispered reading the note Blaise had floated out of the box. “If I see you with another man again, you’ll pay with your life and theirs.”

Inside the box lay a picture from her at breakfast of her laughing with Ron, her hand on his hand, her sipping coffee alone, her reading the daily prophet.

His insides roiled with barely controlled anger, his pulse rang loudly in his ears. Her eyes found his and the ache in his chest from seeing her so scared made him want to scream.

“We need to pull up the footage from the security surveillance and find who delivered these.” Draco said. He’d find the person who delivered these and make them pay.

“Agreed.” Blaise pulled a laptop out of his bag and sat down on the couch. Hermione hadn’t moved from where the letter and photos still hung in the air, tears slipping down her face. Draco waved his wand and put away the items back into the box.

“You don’t need to read that.” He said softly. He wanted to hug her. He wanted to hide her away from all of it, but that wouldn’t be helpful. Nor would she appreciate it. So he moved to Blaise instead and watched as he sped through hours of footage.

“There.” Blaise said. Hermione moved to the other side of Blaise, leaning over him to see the image of the man placing the flowers and package down. He had a delivery uniform on and was whistling to himself.

“He’s so...old.” Hermione said surprised. “I don’t recognize him at all though.”

The man had barely any hair on his head, and a poor excuse for a beard.

“Blaise.” Draco said, his voice hard.

“I’ll reinforce the wards and stay here until you’re back.” Blaise’s expression told him he understood.

Draco took one long look at Hermione and apperated away.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

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

Draco Malfoy was good at a lot of things.

He was good at potions

He was good at legilimency.

He was good at lying.

And he was good at hurting people.

He never wanted to be a Death Eater, not truly for the reasons Voldemort wanted him to be one. One of the advantages, however, was the skillset it opened up for him. The skill he was unaware of. As a young boy it hardly felt like a skill, he couldn't kill Dumbledore, because he didn't want to kill him. But when he wanted to kill someone? When that spiraling desire hit him full force. Nothing could stop him.

Draco tracked the man down rather easily. *Too easily*. The wizard seemed to expect his arrival. Which concerned Draco deeply.

Once the piece of shit was sufficiently tied to a chair, he did nothing but laugh and spit at him and Potter.

Even after their initial *interrogations*.

Draco looked at Potter as he twirled a bloodied hammer in his hand.

“I’ll ask you again.” Potter’s voice was deadly. “Who hired you?”

The old man had not been under the imperius curse when he delivered the flowers and package, he was proud of his actions.

“I hired myself. Volunteered for the honor!” The old man spat. “Mudblood whores don’t deserve to be given choices anymore. Witches are subservient to Wizards, but mudbloods should be enslaved entirely.”

Draco threw a cracking punch into the man’s nose.

The man laughed like a honking goose as blood dripped down his feral looking face. “I will die knowing you can’t stop what’s coming. I will die knowing she’ll get what’s coming for her.”

Harry stepped forward, “You will die very painfully and you will die even slower.” The hammer slammed into the man’s wrist with a sickening crack.

Draco would hunt down every fucking person who tried to harm Hermione or any muggle born for that matter. He'd done it before after all. The list grew longer with each new day that passed, that was fine.

Making amends would take time.

He picked up his wand.

“*Sectumsempra.*”

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Sleep evaded Hermione more than ever before. She'd studied the footage with Blaise four times, helped reinforce the wards, baked two dozen chocolate muffins and an apple caramel pie. Neither of which she'd been able to eat because her stomach adamantly denied any food she tried to taste. Pansy and Theo had come over for the day and they were happy to eat her creations.

Once they left it was harder to be distracted. She finally tried to sleep a little after midnight, but it was no use. Blaise was situated in her living room on the couch working on his computer. Hermione edited some of her manuscript while in bed, realizing she needed to return to Askaban for another follow up interview. Malfoy would certainly dislike that.

Hermione hadn't heard from him since he left this morning. The desperate feeling to call him, text him, owl him, even shout for him was a constant tap on her shoulder. It was unsettling how much she needed to know he was okay. He'd been back in her life a mere seventy-two hours and she was already fretting over his wellbeing, what kind of chokehold did this man have over her.

Throwing her comforter off for the third time, she walked into her sitting room. Perhaps Blaise would watch a movie with her. It was three am but at this point she probably wouldn't get any sleep at all. Maybe she should exercise to burn off the extra energy buzzing through her body.

Her heart skipped a beat as she saw him hunched over his computer in the dark of her living room.

“You're back.” She said quietly upon seeing, *not* Blaise on her couch, but Malfoy in his place. Her stomach sank at his bandaged hand, dried blood crusted through the cotton.

“An hour ago.” He replied, closing the laptop in front of him. He was dressed in a black t-shirt and grey sweatpants almost the exact same outfit she had on, except she was wearing a forest green t-shirt instead. *He'd been here for an hour!*

Hermione shifted on her feet unsure what to do before throwing caution aside and sitting next to him on the couch. “Is your hand alright?”

“It’s fine.” His eyes sharpened on her as she sat down. “Why are you awake?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” Her voice trembled slightly. The fear she kept at bay all day threatening to spill over. “Why are you awake?”

“The same reason.” He sighed. The dark circles under his eyes and slight sag of his shoulders told Hermione how tired he was. She took his injured hand gently into hers.

“Would you like me to heal this properly?” She brushed a thumb over a bruised knuckle. “It’s going to swell like a balloon.”

“In the morning perhaps.” He didn’t move away as she held his hand in her lap.

“Did you find the delivery man?” She met his eyes again.

“Yes.” Malfoy’s jaw feathered. “But he gave us very little information. He was an occlumens and went to great lengths to keep himself protected. We didn’t learn It’s bigger than one person unfortunately.”

Hermione leaned against the back of the couch and gently massaged Malfoy’s forearm while he recounted the man’s words.

“Do you think that’s why I get so many different varieties of handwriting?” Hermione asked, contemplating the interrogation.

“Possibly.” Malfoy’s head turned to her with a yawn. A yawn that made him look so unlike the posh Malfoy she knew that the corner of her mouth tugged up.

“Does having an unknown number of blood-purists amuse you?” Malfoy arched his brow.

Hermione shook her head, yawning herself this time. “No it does not. I am actually scared if I’m being honest, but this won’t stop me from living my life. If they want to attack me,” She lifted her chin. “Then I say bring it on.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Malfoy huffed a laugh. They were quiet for a moment and Hermione found herself leaning her head against his shoulder. As his injured fingers laid against her leg, he released a long breath.

“And your hand injury is from your interrogation?” Hermione asked quietly.

“Yes.” Was all he said.

“Thank you.” Hermione murmured.

“Let’s go to sleep.” Malfoy muttered through another yawn. And without saying anything else Malfoy pulled his arm away from her lap and pulled them both down onto the couch. Pulling her back tightly against his chest, he wordlessly summoned a blanket for them.

Hermione exhaled as the tidal wave of exhaustion bore down on her. Malfoy draped his other arm around her, his legs intertwining with hers. Her body began releasing the wound up tension she'd been holding onto all day.

Malfoy was quiet for so long she thought he'd fallen asleep.

"I have an important question for you." Draco murmured into her hair, a sharp zapping sensation moved down her neck and through her limbs.

"What's that?" She whispered back.

"What is your Halloween costume?"

"That's your important question?"

"Answer it."

"I don't know. I was considering a few things." Hermione hadn't really thought about it that much with everything else going on. "Probably a cat."

"Dress up with me."

"Is that a dare?"

"No, just a *friendly* request."

"And if I say yes, what would we be dressing up as?"

Malfoy leaned in and whispered into her ear. "Alright." She chuckled.

He squeezed her in response. "Wonderful. Now go to sleep, witch."

"Goodnight friend." She said as her eyes fell shut. He had the audacity to pinch her. "I prefer the term, best friend now." He said into her hair.

Hermione found herself smiling as she fell into a dreamless sleep for the first time in four months.

## Chapter End Notes

Alexa, play Chokehold by Sleep Token.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

TW: Discussion of suicide ideation

Narcissa and Pansy did not blink as they stared down at Hermione like two mother hens. The pair's pursed lips and crossed arms made something sink in her stomach. The two women hovering over her did not look anything alike, but wore the same grave expression. Hermione jerked up abruptly and went nowhere. Malfoy's large hand splayed underneath her shirt across her stomach, kept her locked in place.

"We have company." Hermione wiggled to get free from his iron grip, but immediately stopped. Her body flushed hot as she felt his hardened length against her ass. And immediately cold with the fact that his mother stood above them watching.

Pansy sighed and began to pace. Hermione knew exactly what that meant.

"We have been looking for you everywhere. I even attempted to call your muggle phone for crying out loud!"

Yep that was Pansy's lecturing face alright.

Narcissa Malfoy stood with impeccable posture, a single brow arched. There were many thoughts Hermione could guess Narcissa was having at the moment. Considering she found her son entangled with her on the couch, his hand a few millimeters away from groping Hermione's breasts, but it was the edge of concern in her gaze that made Hermione elbow Malfoy awake.

"What was that—" Malfoy paused. "Hello mother." His arm finally loosened and Hermione broke free.

"What time is it?" She asked with a yawn.

"Noon!" Pansy screeched. "Your front door was locked. The floo was shut down! That muggle phone seemed to be useless and we were scared shitless!" Pansy pressed two fingers into both sides of her temple.

"I shut down the floo last night after the flower delivery." Malfoy sat up. "Didn't want any surprises."

"You both need to meet us at the manor immediately." Was all Narcissa said as she walked out of Hermione's front door. Which looked like it had been blasted through with a battering

ram. How the fuck she slept through it was beyond her... and she slept till noon? She hadn't done that in.... ever.

"What's going on?" Malfoy stretched. "Why are we in trouble for sleeping well?"

"Because of this!" Pansy shoved the Daily prophet into their hands.

Malfoy leaned against Hermione's shoulder as they both read.

## The Daily Prophet

9th of October

Bennet Macnair

### **Muggle Born Amateur Author Hermione Granger Begs For Ronald Weasley To Take Her Back After Getting Engaged To Heiress Daphne Greengrass.**

*It seems as though Hermione Granger is filled with regret after losing the wizarding world's most eligible bachelor and war hero, Ronald Weasley. The two were spotted together yesterday and onlookers say Granger was infatuated with him, smiling at his every word. After Weasley told his ex-girlfriend that he's off the market, she laughed in his face. Only once she realized he was serious, did she clutch his arm and plead for another chance.*

*"She constantly complimented him, she called him handsome as soon as he arrived." An anonymous source told us. Granger stormed off after Ron Weasley enforced a boundary with her regarding his upcoming marriage.*

*"He was very protective of Miss Greengrass." Our source says. "It's unfortunate that Miss Granger couldn't be happy for him."*

*When asked for a comment on the couple's announcement Granger's publicist Pansy Parkinson spoke for her instead. "Hermione Granger wishes nothing but happiness for her childhood friend."*

*There was no mention of an apology for her public behavior nor did she acknowledge Miss Greengrass's existence in the statement.*

*When asked for comment from the future Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, Ronald was a forgiving person. "Hermione will always be my friend. No matter what."*

*Miss Greengrass was equally kind as she is beautiful. "Miss Granger is allowed to grieve her former relationship with my fiance. I know how lucky I am to have Ronald. it's understandable that her jealousy got the best of her, she's a muggleborn. I just hope she can look past those insecurities and move on."*

*It remains to be seen if Hermione Granger is willing to forge a friendship with Miss Greengrass or continue to be jealous of the couple's happiness.*

*Follow The Daily Prophet for your latest updates on this evolving story.*

*Available both in print or digital copy on the Wizarding Wide Web.*

Malfoy and Hermione arrived twenty minutes later at the manor. Narcissa stood in the sitting room, arms crossed staring out at the gardens beyond the large windows. And when she turned upon their arrival, Hermione couldn't help but think Narcissa looked like a general waiting to hand out battle orders. Theo sat in a chair with a dozen copies of The Daily Prophet on a low wooden table in front of him, examining the moving photo of Hermione touching Ron's arm.

Hermione swallowed nervously.

"Hermione." Narcissa's voice was curt, not cruel. "You did not tell me about the threats you have been receiving." Not a question, but a demand for explanation.

"I didn't want to scare you and didn't really think it was that serious until recently."

"Catch me up to speed immediately." Narcissa lifted her chin.

"Narcissa, if this is about The Prophet article, I've been smeared many times. I don't care what they say about me." Hermione stopped paying attention to those kinds of articles a long time ago. It was nonsense and Hermione had never allowed Pansy to react to them.

Narcissa's eyes narrowed. "Well I care about what they say about you."

"As do I." Malfoy said, next to her.

"Me too!" Theo said not looking up from the notes he was taking.

"And I know by the way Miss Parkinson stormed the manor this morning she does too." Narcissa said.

"And Harry and Blaise." Malfoy added.

"I'm grateful for each of your support, but nothing in this article is true and anyone who believes this is not a friend of mine. I'm sure they took Ron and Daphne's quotes out of context too." Hermione didn't want to talk about the article any longer.

"If you think this is a coincidence after the attack you experienced, you are not using that sharp mind of yours. And now that I know you've been receiving threats regularly, I will not stand to watch you tortured again. In the media or otherwise." Hermione's throat was dry as clay, eyes stinging in response to Narcissa's tone. The way she delivered it sounded like a mother about to go to war for her child... Hermione's own mother abandoned her, the pain still visceral even years later. And Narcissa was coming to fight alongside her.

Narcissa swallowed, the only sign of emotional response, waiting for Hermione to explain what was happening to her.

"I slept with someone four months ago and someone took pictures of it. I was sent the explicit photos with a threat to share them publicly." Hermione's tone was matter of fact. Like she was reciting history facts in school. Narcissa was right, Hermione hadn't been thinking very critically about any of it. She had been distracted the last few months after her breakup with Ron and for good reason, but to think she'd been dating him at the beginning of the year made her skin crawl.

Narcissa's expression didn't change except for a minute movement of her lip. Her eyes slid to Malfoy, a single brow raised.

*What the fuck.*

Malfoy nodded.

"I should have known that's why you were so miserable." Narcissa released a breath with a subtle roll of her eyes. "Alright." She clapped her hands together moving toward a wingback chair, gesturing for them to sit on the couch. "We need a plan and we need it quickly. Once Miss Parkinson is done hunting down the reporter and those anonymous sources, she will meet my contact at The Daily Prophet. We will have a response up and ready within a few days. Something extremely positive about your book release."

Hermione and Malfoy sat down next to one another, where Narcissa and Hermione had just been one day prior.

"Why weren't you mentioned in the article today? They mentioned she ran off, but if I'm assuming the timeline is correct she came with you to the manor." Narcissa's brow furrowed slightly.

Malfoy rolled his jaw. "After I was out of Azkaban I asked them to not print mine or father's name or photos."

Narcissa huffed. "Asked, did you?"

Malfoy sighed. "I asked very, very *nicely* ." Hermione was certain that was not the case.

"And you didn't think to ask the same for her?" Narcissa asked, both brows rising.

"That is not his responsibility." Hermione defended him before he could respond. Narcissa ignored her waiting for him to explain, but was interrupted when Blaise walked through.

“Sorry I’m late.” He pulled a chair up next to Theo, who’d sat back in his chair observing. “Message boards are picking up steam today.” Blaise said to Malfoy.

Malfoy turned to Hermione. “We should go on a date.”

Her cheeks flushed instantly, but the detachment of his stare caught her off guard. Not exactly a reassuring way to ask someone out.

Theo snapped his head up. “Are you two dating? Does Harry know?”

“I don’t think now is the time to discuss this.” Hermione shakes her head.

“Please tell me that I know before him. Please, please, please” Theo clasped his hands together begging.

Malfoy looked at Theo. “Yes... we are dating.” He shrugged. “Platonically.”

Hermione frowned.

“Draco, do you know what that word means?” Theo’s expression quizzical.

“How is *platonically* dating going to help?” Hermione asked dryly. *What the fuck is platonically dating?*

“Whoever sent those flowers wants to control you, but being seen with me sends a different type of message.” His face remained completely blank. And his ability to mask his emotions was disconcerting.

“They’ll go after you immediately though. I’m not going to risk your life over this.” Hermione shook her head.

“But you’ll risk yours every single day stepping out of your house?” He looked down her nose at her.

Hermione folded her arms. “That’s different, they’re after me. There isn’t any need to add more people on the target list.”

“And it’s my fault.” Malfoy hissed, leaning forward.

“Stop saying that!” Hermione snapped, glaring at him.

“He’s right.” Blaise said. “If you’re seen with Draco, they’ll know exactly who he is and what they’re up against. I think it’s smart. No one is more feared than Draco. Whether it’s the power, privilege, or history, he’s got a lot to intimidate someone with.”

Hermione rolls her eyes. “Of course you agree with him.”

Blaise’s offense was instant. “I assure you Granger I’m not agreeing with him to appease his interests in you or stroke his already enormously large ego. If I thought it was a bad idea I would simply say so. He and I are not in business together because I fear his wrath. I’m in

business with him because I respect it. And you being seen with Draco Malfoy after a smear campaign is a message that would tell the entire wizarding community whose protection your under.”

Hermione opened and closed her mouth. “Sorry Blaise, I didn’t mean to insinuate—“

“I like it too.” Narcissa said with a smile Hermione could only describe as mischievous. “It would be nice to see your face in the paper again, Draco. And with Hermione no less.”

“I will not help his reputation.” Hermione sighed. “Especially if this is your debut back into wizarding society for the first time in five years.”

“But it’s not going to harm him either.” Theo said.

“Before we discuss these details any further, do you trust him?” Blaise nodded at Theo

“Theo? Of course I trust him.” Hermione scowled.

Blaise leaned forward, speaking in a whisper. “Are you certain he’s not the stalker?”

“I’m right here!” Theo stared open mouthed at Blaise.

“Malfoy’s more of a stalker than Theo.” Hermione threw it out as a joke, but also a test... But the man next to her didn’t show any sign of giving up his secrets. Not even a flinch.

“I can have Theo removed,” Blaise offered with a shrug. “Just say the word.”

“I trust him.” Hermione reassured him.

“You’re my only friend Hermione.” Theo replied as he moved out of the chair next to Blaise and sat on the other side of Hermione on the couch, effectively squishing her against Malfoy’s body. Every place they touched felt hot.

“The first outing can’t be a date.” Narcissa tapped her chin in a way only she could make look elegant. “It needs to look organic. Like the public is watching something unfold before their eyes. Your book launch party is the perfect place to start. We will get a photo of you two with Hermione’s book and make that start the conversation.”

“Our Halloween party is next.” Theo adds. “And that is the perfect follow up. So many of our guests will see them interact.”

“Then a date.” Narcissa nodded. “Somewhere really upscale, romantic.”

“Harmony and Hearth.” Malfoy shifted on the couch, his fingers brushing hers. She couldn’t tell if it had been an accident or on purpose, but sitting next to him was not helping her focus.

“Perfect choice, dear.” Narcissa smiled approvingly.

Hermione’s head ping ponged around the room as their date was planned in rapid fire.

“Pansy and I can follow in later.” Theo leaned forward. “We’ll snap a few out of focus photos of you two getting cozy. I’ll leak a few online before we call the media.”

“Go in disguise though.” Blaise suggested to Theo. “I’ll be on watch outside as well and if it’s after Halloween I’ll have time to work on the wards and coordinate with the restaurant.”

“Then we’ll be seen leaving the restaurant together by the media.” Malfoy replied.

“The next day Draco, you’ll need to be seen alone in Diagon Alley and let the press grab a comment from you.” Narcissa added.

“But keep it vague.” Theo said.

“I’ll just tell the truth.” He turned to Hermione with an arrogant smirk. “We are very good friends.”

Pansy strode in looking ready to break necks. “What’s the plan?”

“We are going on a date.” Malfoy grinned.

“Platonically.” Hermione said.

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Hermione Granger flipped through her manuscript absentmindedly in her sitting room. It had been only three days since she’d last seen Draco Malfoy but her mind had doubled its efforts to remind her of his existence. She’d gotten quite good at ignoring that incessant compulsion over the last several months. Or more if she ever felt like being honest with herself about the topic of him, but she did not.

A mere week back into her life and he took up way too much space in her mind. Ignoring him now was much harder and that much more frustrating. Especially knowing her new manuscript needed more work. How on earth she was going to get to Askban without Malfoy trying to follow her was another issue she hadn’t quite worked out. At most she could push it out a few weeks, but the longer she waited the more urgency she felt to get it completed. Plus, she had a feeling Malfoy was always watching her. He hadn’t called her again on her muggle phone and she was both grateful and disappointed which was completely illogical.

“Come in.” Hermione called to the knock on her door.

“You look amazing.” Pansy greeted her. “Are you ready? I want to get there early for pictures to submit to Witch Weekly magazine.”

"Yes, let's go." Hermione closed her manuscript and tucked her bookmark inside, careful to not let Pansy see any of it. No one had read this book and no one would until it was published if she could help it. And Pansy would most certainly have questions about both the topic and her bookmark.

Ron had been able to get the floo network permits approved in time that allowed them to floo to the restaurant. Hermione made a mental note to thank him tonight and ask who else was involved so she could thank them as well. Perhaps after he had a few drinks his lips would loosen about who his friends were in the ministry. It would be much more helpful to know before she went to Askaban.

The restaurant had transformed into a beautiful space. It was her first time back since the night she met Malfoy. Her stomach fluttered at the sight of her favorite booth. Tall cocktail tables scattered part of the space, alongside larger formal tables set for a full dinner. The golden lights glowed slightly brighter as staff cleaned wine glasses behind the bar and a backdrop overflowing with blue and purple florals created perfect for place for pictures and speeches at the front of the room.

It was beyond anything she could have imagined and definitely much nicer than what she would have prepared for at Flourish & Blotts.

Hermione nervously slid her hand over the long sleeved green velvet dress she wore.

"It's stunning, isn't it?" Pansy said at her side.

"It is." Hermione agreed. "I'm not sure how you pulled it off so quickly."

"I had two Malfoys to help coordinate everything quite efficiently. Draco wouldn't let me pay for anything so our marketing budget is still untouched."

Hermione's head turned. "He won't let me pay for a damned thing. It's quite irritating."

"It's Draco. He's an actions over words person. I'm not surprised at all." Pansy smiled. "Just enjoy yourself tonight. I'm incredibly proud of you." She squeezed Hermione's arm before walking away.

Hermione was determined to do just that. Enjoy herself and bask in this milestone. She desperately wished she would have had this kind of book when she discovered she was a witch. Every muggle born deserved to have much more support than they had and this was just one step to make that happen.

Guests started arriving and Hermione greeted her friends, colleagues, and former teachers with joy. The crowd began to buzz with conversation and she watched debating if she should cross the room and help as Hagrid tried to sit on a barstool a few times before giving up, but Neville Longbottom saved him, by idening the seat for the gentle giant with a swish of his wand.

"Hermione." Harry approached, wrapping her in a tight hug. "Congratulations."

"Thank you. Thank you for coming." Hermione squeezed him back.

"I wouldn't miss it." Harry grinned. "We really need to catch up. I have loads to tell you." He scratched the back of his neck nervously.

"I'd love that. I want to hear everything." Hermione nodded as they watched the gathering crowd. Staff began handing out glasses of wine and appetizers.

"Do you want to grab dinner or drinks tomorrow evening?" Harry asked.

Hermione sighed. "I am advised by your co-worker Malfoy to not bee seen alone in public with other men right now so you could come over to my house, if you'd like."

"Oh right, he mentioned that. Your house is great."

"You two are quite close it seems." She gave him a sideways glance.

"He's alright." Harry shrugged, but the playful smile on his face told Hermione that she was right.

"Is Ron coming tonight?"

"Yes, him and Daphne." Hermione replied.

"That's going to be fun." Harry wrinkled his nose. "Good luck." Neville waved at Harry from across the room. "I should go say hi." He gave her another smile before weaving through the crowd.

A waiter offered Hermione a glass of red wine and when she took a sip she almost spit it out, but remembered the price tag so she forced herself to swallow it. They were serving the same wine Malfoy forced her to try and damn was it still so fucking delicious.

"That one was poisoned by the way." His rich low voice wrapped around her like a hug. It had only been three days and yet seeing him again was such a rush. Malfoy stood next to her, in an all black fitted suit, outlining his tall body with perfection. Her body became immediately aware of how close he stood, just out of touching distance, but close enough to feel his warmth and smell his cologne.

Hermione was supposed to say something like, *thank you Malfoy for hosting and all of your generosity*, but what came out instead was, "Why are you serving this wine?"

"Because it's my favorite." Malfoy turned towards her, his fingers grazing hers as his grey eyes dragged slowly down her body. "You look absolutely beautiful."

His compliment washed over her like it was first time she'd ever heard the word. "Thank you." She replied quietly letting her fingers brush his in return. Every touch from him felt like gripping an electric current. Hermione began to feel the stares of others as she stood so close to him. His name making it way through the room like a wave, starting slow and building momentum.

"Before you get too busy, would you sign my book?" Malfoy pulled out "*The Muggleborn's Guide to Magic.*" And opened the cover, offering her a familiar pen.

"As long as that pen is no longer a portkey." Hermione set down her wine glass at the table next to her.

"Not this time." He smiled and her pulse felt as unpredictable as lightening when he looked at her like that. Like they were only two in the room.

Malfoy gave her the pen slowly, sliding his fingers against her palm. "How did you get the portkey so last minute like that?" She wondered, leaning closer to him like a magnet. She had no choice in the matter.

"It's a private portkey, I can use it any time I'd like." He said as nonchalantly as he would ask to for someone to pass the butter. Hermione on the other hand could hardly wrap her mind around it. "Private portkey?" She gasped softly. "Isn't that the equivalent of a muggle's private jet?"

"Yes, but I have one of those too." He lifted a shoulder. Suddenly Hermione understood Malfoy's childhood arrogance. He was richer beyond anything she could imagine.

"Any requests for what I write?" Hermione asked, the pen hovering over the inside of her book.

"To my number one fan, you're the best friend I've ever had. Thank you for reading all of my books. You're a talented wizard. You're smart. You're very handsome. You're great in bed-"

Hermione hit his shoulder. "Shut up." She laughed then began to write. "How about, thank you for being my friend even though I had to beg you." She signed her name, shutting the book with a small clap.

Malfoy moved closer and spoke just so she could hear, his voice raspy and low. "Don't you remember, I like when you beg." Hermione held his heated gaze as that undeniable tension grew taut.

"You haven't read all my books." She smirked, sipping her wine.

"Yes, I have." He said.

"Not all of them." Hermione arched her brow.

"I can assure you I have every copy of every book you've written." He sipped his wine, then whispered into her ear. "I especially liked, *Love by the Lake* ." Hermione's cheeks heated and then she couldn't help, let out a loud laugh. "How the hell did you find that?" Her romance novels were written under a pen name and sold only in muggle book stores. It was a quite lucrative endeavor which allowed her to pursue her other interests.

He returned her smile. "I told you, I'm your number one fan. I'd like your autograph on those as well." He was so close to her, she could smell a hint of the muggle toothpaste intertwining

with his wine. Something about the smell tugged at her mind. It was familiar somehow.

“Draco!” A feminine, high-pitched voice stopped Hermione’s reply.

Ron wore a cocky grin across his face as he approached with Daphne’s hand wrapped around his arm, a glistening diamond ring on display.

“Daphne.” Malfoy nodded, but She had already moved to hug him, throwing both arms around his neck enthusiastically. When Daphne stepped back Ron pulled her back and wound his arm around her waist protectively, grin gone.

“Why are you here?” Daphne giggled childishly. “You’ve been missing for years and suddenly you show up at a muggleborn’s book release?”

“He’s working for Hermione.” Ron explained.

“No actually, I’m not on duty tonight.” Malfoy corrected. “I’m here because I’m a fan of Hermione’s books.”

“Well it’s nice to see a friendly face.” Daphne cooed. “I tried to get your mother to tell me where you were hiding after Askaban, but she kept your secrets.”

“What better reason to come back into the wizarding world than my favorite author.” Malfoy gestured to Hermione and Daphne blinked as if she hadn’t seen her at all.

“Oh.” she said awkwardly. “Hermione. Congratulations on your little book.”

“Thank you, Daphne.” Hermione smiled politely.

“Yeah Mione, Congrats.” Ron grabbed two glasses of wine from a waiter, handing one to his fiancé.

“And thank you Ron for your help with the floo permits. Is there a specific friend at the Ministry who helped you? I’d love to send a thank you card.” Hermione said. Damn she should have timed that better.

“No problem. That’s what friends are for.” Ron’s cocky grin returned. “But my friends don’t like to advertise their help. Are you still writing that book on Askaban?”

“Yes.” Hermione straightened her shoulders. “It’s been a bit delayed, but yes I am.”

Ron looked at Malfoy. “It’s going to be a lot of work for you if she publishes that thing. I told her that it wasn’t a good idea, but she wouldn’t listen to me.” He turned back to Hermione. “I worry about you making the wrong people upset, especially in the midst of all your other issues. What do you think your mom would say?”

“Ron.” Hermione willed herself to not cry or yell at him. He did it on purpose, she knew that, but he wouldn’t get away with it. She just needed more time. And she certainly would not allow him to ruin her party.

"I'm just saying." Ron shrugged. "Sometimes I question your judgment about your own safety. You shouldn't be taking unnecessary risks like that."

"Her judgment is quite sound." Malfoy said moving closer to Hermione, but his full attention was on Ron, giving him the infamous Malfoy sneer. "And I welcome any and all trouble that comes her way."

"You say that now." Ron laughed.

"Congratulations by the way." Hermione wanted nothing more than to shut this conversation down. "To you both."

"Oh thanks." Daphne's eyes were fixed on Malfoy when she replied. "Draco, does this mean you'll be back for good? Perhaps I could come by the manor and catch up with you."

Ron's head snapped in her direction. "You are not going to Malfoy Manor. That godsawful place holds the worst memories for me. Hermione will tell you." Ron gestured to Hermione with his wine glass, almost sloshing the wine out of his cup. Perhaps he was already a little drunk.

"Oh, I like the manor actually." Hermione shrugged. "I'm over there quite often."

Ron's jaw tightened as Daphne's eyes widened with shock.

"Speaking of, my mother's waving." Malfoy turned "You know she'll want to see you, Hermione."

"Right, of course. Thank you both for coming." Hermione moved forward and Malfoy placed a hand on her lower back guiding her through the crowd. Every person they passed whispered his name.

"Is that Draco Malfoy?"

"Draco Malfoy is here!"

"Draco Malfoy is with Hermione Granger!"

"When was the last time you saw Draco Malfoy?"

"Get a picture, my mother will not believe this."

Once they were successfully to the other side of the room, he moved his hand and Hermione would be lying if she said she didn't miss it. Gods she was pathetic.

"Thank you." She said as he pulled her chair out for her at their table where Narcissa was fully engaged in her own conversation with Luna Lovegood.

"Does he do that often?" Malfoy sat beside her, pulling his chair close.

"What?" Hermione drank a large gulp of wine. "Talk down to me in front of other people so I can't make a scene? Bring up my mother like she didn't abandon me? Criticize my judgment? Yes, fairly often I would say."

"Is that why you two broke up?" Malfoy's knee moved next to hers, his eyes were soft and curious, no judgment in sight.

"No." Hermione replied quietly. "We broke up because of the Azkaban book."

Malfoy's brow furrowed. "He broke up with you over your book?"

"I broke up with *him* because of my book." Hermione said "It was the wakeup call to all of his other flaws. I don't really want to talk about it tonight though."

Malfoy stared at her for a moment before responding, "He never deserved you." He reached for his own wine as Pansy walked to the front of the room, the lights glowing prettily along the backdrop of gorgeous flowers.

"May I have your attention." Pansy stood, amplifying her voice with her wand.

"I want to welcome each of you and thank you for your support. Everyone here knows how special Hermione Granger is, but I wanted to start by sharing why I love her dearly. I've never shared this publicly before so forgive me for the annoying emotions that will certainly follow. Three and a half years ago I ran into Hermione because we both go to the same mind healer's office. As we sat in the waiting room Hermione started a conversation with me. It was small talk, nothing more." Pansy smiled at Hermione with glossy eyes, Hermione had already started crying. She knew exactly where this was going.

"But right after Hermione was called back for her appointment, she slipped me a note with her floo information, saying 'just in case you ever want to talk.' I didn't really want to talk, but I saved that paper and to this day I'm so grateful I did. After denouncing blood supremacy my parents disavowed me, cut me off in all ways, and I was alone. Three months after Hermione gave me that note I floo'd to her house at two am." Pansy was crying now and Hermione couldn't stop the flood of tears. Malfoys hand settled over her knee underneath the table and she instantly intertwined her hand with his. His thumb swept over hers in a gentle stroke.

"I planned to take my life that night." Pansy said. "I was depressed and hopeless and alone. And I reached into my drawer to grab my wand but my fingers found Hermione's note instead. So I raced to my floo and landed in Hermione's home in the middle of the night having had one polite conversation with her in years and her first question to me was, "How can I help?"

She listened to me cry, held me, and then moved me into her flat." Pansy sniffed. "I hate crying. I hate crying even more in public, but I had to share this because Hermione is an angel. She literally saved my life." Pansy turned towards Hermione as she spoke. "Hermione, this book you've written is going to undo the damage my parents caused. It's going to give muggle born children a more equal start in the wizarding world, and I believe wholeheartedly that it will save more lives. Thank you for being my friend and thank you for writing this

book.” Hermione stood, moving to Pansy as quickly as her high heels would allow. A bursting applause went through the room and Theo whistled loudly as Hermione approached her friend.

“I love you so much.” They hugged each other tight. Pansy kissed her head before releasing her.

“Alright, no more crying.” Pansy fanned herself and a chuckle moved through the room. “Dinner will be served shortly and of course everyone in attendance is receiving a copy of *The Muggleborn’s Guide to Magic*. Pictures are encouraged and please share your reviews with your friends. But first,” She looked at Hermione with a sly grin and slung an arm around her. “We have a surprise for you Hermione.”

Hermione looked around the room for a hint at what to expect, but got nothing from the crowd. Minerva Mcgonagal stood and approached the women. “As a former professor at Hogwarts I’ve seen first hand how Hermione dedicated her life to the art and science of being a witch. I’ve never witnessed someone more in love with learning and mastering the skill of magic. She is wise, kind, and brave. And as the current headmistress of Hogwarts I’ve also observed how Muggle born children come to the school underprepared for what they encounter. This disadvantage is significant, especially in the first year of school when so many are trying to not only learn magic but make friends and become part of wizarding society culturally. And I know Hermione’s book will indeed help those children. It is with great honor that I have the privilege to announce that because of the generosity of an anonymous benefactor we are able to give every muggle born child a copy of her book along with the option of attending a new course named after the book itself.” Hermione’s mouth hung open as she hugged Mcgonagall, tears continuously streaming down her face. Her eyes met Draco’s and she knew without question it was him, “Thank you.” She mouthed to him. He lifted his red wine and winked.

Theo stood as waiters passed around champagne,. “A toast to Hermione Granger, we are all lucky to call you a friend, may we live to earn the title of it.” He lifted his champagne into the air and “To Hermione!”

A half hour later the door opened loudly and Hermione stood with shriek.

“Ginny!” Hermione raced to her friend.

“Hermione.” Ginny was still dressed in quidditch gear and sounded like she’d been running. “I came here as soon as I could. I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“I know how busy you are.” Hermione squeezed her face. “I’ve missed you so much!” They hugged a second time even longer. “Come let’s get you a drink.”

“Ginerva.” Pansy dragged her cat-like gaze over the quidditch player as they approached the table. “You’re looking well.”

Ginny tossed her long braid to the side. “You don’t look too bad yourself, Parkinson.”

Hours after everyone left, Draco, Hermione, Harry, Blaise, Theo, Pansy, and Ginny all sat around a booth drinking and laughing like they'd done this their whole lives. Hermione didn't even have the good sense to not lean on Draco in front of them. Her head rested on his shoulder and his hand had immediately went to her leg staying there like an anchor. That's what it felt like touching him, she was centered by the weight in his hand, grounded by the lazy brush of his thumb. His touch eased something inside Hermione and it was exhilarating and overwhelming, but not something she would unpack now. No she would just let it be there and enjoy it. All her fears and insecurities could be stuffed down for now. She needed to stop overthinking him. She already thought of him way too often as it was.

Hermione sighed. "I need to use the loo."

Draco moved out of the booth and helped steady her before she walked away passing the bar. A large silver box and white bow sat on the bartop, a tag labeled *Hermione Granger*.

She smiled. "What's this?"

No one heard her and she giggled at all her friends laughing together. The sight could make her cry again. She was so damned happy. Happier than she'd been in a very long time. Hermione slid the bow off, dizzy from the alcohol and joy.

And as she lifted the lid, it exploded with a blast of fire.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for reading! thank you for your comments and kudos.

When I started writing this pic I had a lot of the first several chapters already written, so I was able to write those fairly quickly. The updates might be slower as the story progresses and I find time to write in between life's duties.

Thank you again for all the support, every comment motivates me so much!

Draco Malfoy threw his head back in laughter as Blaise explained how he found Theo in bed with two women and two men last christmas.

He glanced in Hermione's direction as she walked towards the bathroom, contemplating following her, but that was probably way too overbearing. Looking back at his friends, he was grateful that tonight went so perfectly. Hermione deserved every good thing that came her way and she-

He glanced at her again as she began opening a box, a box he hadn't seen before. He screamed a containment spell as he whipped his wand out, but it was too late. A rain of fire exploded from the box throwing Hermione violently backwards. The box spit out what looked like thousands of strips of confetti all on fire and rapidly burning everywhere in the room. Small sparks landing on furniture, curtains, and light fixtures. The others immediately scrambled out of the booth, yelling spells to stop the flames as Draco ran towards Hermione.

"Are you okay?" He covered his mouth trying to not breathe the smoke, brushing away the signed pieces of paper against her arms.

"Yeah. I'm alright." She coughed. He lifted her up, looking for any damage. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fine." She nodded.

He wanted to pull her into a hug to feel it for himself that she was breathing, but she began blasting water through the room with her wand. Draco staggered after her, his chest tightened painfully. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think straight as his heart hammered in his chest about what he just witnessed.

"Draco." Hermione grabbed his hand. He looked at her honey brown eyes. *She was safe, she was safe, she was safe.* He couldn't say anything, he just stared at her still in shock.

Tugging him forward, she continued to repeat spell after spell putting the fire out that danced around the room. After a few moments his pulse slowed but he kept a hold of her hand as he

started to join the efforts of the others.

Twenty minutes later the room was fire free. The damage would be manageable, but the way Draco felt wasn't. Although his body had calmed, his mind spiraled around a never ending loop. *You almost got her killed. You almost got her killed.*

"I don't think the box meant to hurt me." Hermione said after the smoke cleared. "It was simply meant to scare me."

Draco silently disagreed. The box had been intended to harm and he let it happen on his time, in his restaurant, to his witch. He'd finally let go of her hand, but the anxious need to touch her remained as did the tightening in his chest as the memory of her being thrown across the room replayed brutally in his mind.

"What makes you say that?" Harry asked.

"This...this is my manuscript." Hermione said as she picked up a strip of burned paper.
"Someone burned my manuscript on Askaban."

"You need to make a list of all individuals who'd be upset with your book." Harry replied.

"How did someone get a copy of that?" Theo asked, "I don't even have a copy of it."

"I recently sent Luna a copy to edit." Hermione spoke softly. "But the spell for this fire was too easy to contain. If they wanted to maim me they could have chosen a dozen different curses. That's why I don't think whoever is doing this is trying to kill me, they want me scared, but they want me alive." Hermione swished her wand, sweeping up a pile of burnt paper.

"Stop." Draco said. "Everyone just stop. We need to find who did this. We don't need to clean it up right now."

"He's right." Pansy said. "I'll come tomorrow and get a crew in here to repair the damage."

Ginny, Theo, and Pasny left shortly after with plans to come back the next day and help clean the restaurant up. Blaise, Harry, and Hermione sat in his office in the restaurant. Draco had no intention of doing anything other than finding the bastard who almost killed Hermione. The heavy realization of his failure forced him to reassess every choice he made that day. He let his guard down and he'd never forgive himself for it.

"Draco, you need to see this." Blaise looked up from his computer, a strange expression on his face. Hermione gasped as she watched the video from the security cameras. Harry grabbed his wand casually, but Draco knew it was tactical.

"What?" He moved forward and his body froze into place as he saw *himself* on the screen.

Draco casually placed the box on the bartop, pulled out a wand, tapped the box to make it disappear, and then strolled away without a care in the world. He did it all with an eerily happy smile on his face and both hands in his pockets.

“When we fast forward the box reappears after the spell wears off.” Harry said, his hand still steady on his wand.

“It’s not Draco’s wand.” Hermione held Draco’s stare with that familiar stubborn look on her face. “It’s not your wand in the video. Someone clearly entered the party using a polyjuice potion. They used your likeness to make it through the crowd unnoticed. I know it wasn’t you Draco.”

“Street cams show this person apperating away a few blocks from the restaurant.” Blaise said.

Draco’s fury was volcanic. The violation of his likeness being used to hurt Hermione scalded his insides.

“Harry put your damned wand away.” Hermione clutched onto Harry’s wand pulling it hard towards her.

Harry tugged it back, but Hermione’s hands still hung on tight.

“I’m not afraid of him, Hermione, I’m worried about him.” Harry yanked on the wand and they continued to play tug-o-war.

“He didn’t do.” *tug*

“ Anything.” *tug*

“ Wrong.” Hermione grunted.

“I want to.” *tug*

“Petrify him in case.” *tug*

“He tries to.” *tug*

“Start tracking down.” *long tug*

“Every person that was in this room tonight.” Harry panted. “Gods your strong Hermione.”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous” Hermione tugged back even quicker and Harry lost his wand to her. She was out of breath as she spoke. “He’s doing no such thing. He is coming home with me. To my bed. To sleep with me.” She huffed, then added. “Platonically!”

Hermione handed Harry his wand back with an eye roll “Wizards are so dramatic.” She grabbed Draco’s waist and apperated them to her house without further warning.

“You apparate faster than anyone else I know.” Draco gasped as they landed in her sitting room. “Gods that was fast.”

"It's simply the three D's Draco. Destination. Determination. Deliberation." Hermione walked away after setting down her things. And he watched in fascination as she lectured him.

"I'm taking a shower and going to bed. You're allowed to shower after me, not with me, but I do expect you to sleep with me." She gave him a forced smile. "Platonically, of course." Then shut the bathroom door.

He stood in the hallway, waiting for her to finish. His mind raced as he considered the events that took place. He should have done everything differently, he should have followed her, he shouldn't have allowed any gifts. The tightness in his chest doubled.

As soon as she opened the door, he spoke. "How do you know it wasn't me? Why are you so sure?"

She held her towel close to her body, rolling her eyes dramatically. "If you wanted to hurt me, I know you well enough to know that you'd hurt me with words. You'd never hurt me physically." She walked to her bedroom door, slamming it shut.

A few minutes later she came back out in sweats and an oversized green shirt. Draco could just make out the hint of her bare nipples as she stomped towards the kitchen. He followed her as she continued to rant.

"First of all, if you wanted to harm me, you have already had a dozen opportunities to do so. Why the fuck would you blast fire into my face right now? Second if you wanted me to go anywhere with you, all you'd have to say is "*Hey the third runic stone is here, hop on my broom and let's ride.*" And I'd fly with you straight into my own kidnapping. Third and most importantly you would never be that obvious. No one would see you coming." She waved her wand, filling her kettle with water and placing it on the stove.

His jaw tightened, guilt lancing every breath he took.

"I'm so sorry Hermione. I'm going to find out what happened tonight. I swear to you they will not get away with hurting you. Harry was not being dramatic, I will hunt down as many people—" Hermione walked up to him and placed a finger against his lips.

"Tomorrow you can do whatever you want, but I don't want to talk about it right now. I know it wasn't you, but it was scary. And I don't want to be alone. Don't leave me tonight." Her voice had become very soft and quiet. "Please."

He grabbed her hand. "I'll stay."

Hermione stepped closer, "Thank you."

She lifted onto her toes, and wrapped her arms around his neck. He hesitated for a split second before wrapping his arms around her waist, lifting her slightly and pulling her against his body. It was terrifying to witness her being blasted across the room. He closed his eyes and leaned against the kitchen counter as they silently held each other for several minutes.

When the tea kettle whistled Hermione slid slowly away.

"Go take a cold shower, it will help with the anxiety. Oh and I washed your pajamas from the other night. They're ready for you on my bed." She said as she poured herself tea.

All he could think about the entire time in his cold shower was how truly and utterly obsessed he was with her. Quickly followed by how devastating it would be for her to know what he'd done to cause this whole mess. He would find out who threatened her and who sent those flowers and who tried to hurt her tonight. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her. He'd find all of them and make them pay mercilessly. His obsession had begun long before tonight, but the reality hit hard and he was so fucked. She spoke about all the reasons she was safe with him and he wanted to fulfill those expectations more than anything, but there were things she didn't know, things he didn't know how to share without her running away. He didn't know how he could go back to not touching her or seeing her up close.

When he walked into Hermione's room, finding her reading on one side of the bed, he thought it might be his new favorite view. Hermione turned out her light as he got into bed beside her. Suddenly he found himself questioning every movement he made.

"Am I allowed to touch you?" He asked quietly into the dark.

"You're required to." Hermione said as she moved closer. He slid one of his arms around her waist, tucking his fingers into her waistband and his body relaxed more than it had all evening as she leaned against him. He just needed to know one thing before tomorrow morning.

"Is this book important to you, Hemione? The one about Azkaban? Is it worth what you're facing?" Draco asked sincerely.

"Yes. Very much." She replied.

"Alright." He said. "I trust you. Whatever you need to get it out. We'll get it out."

"Thank you." Hermione murmured.

After a few moments she said, "If I ask you a question, will you tell me the truth or do I have to ask for a truth or dare?"

Draco kept breathing normally, but tightened his grip on her. "I'll tell you the truth as long as you don't run away." He didn't have it in him to fight tonight, but he'd chase her anyway.

"When did you buy your restaurant?" She responded quietly.

He waited a moment debating on how truthful he should be. Fuck it. This was innocent compared to other things. "The first day I watched you walk into it."

"Alright." she said as she yawned. "Goodnight, to my number one fan."

"Goodnight to my favorite author."

Two hours after she fell asleep, he kissed the top of her head, allowing himself to breathe a slow sigh of relief. He would creep her out eventually, but for now, he was grateful she stayed, grateful she didn't run. He laid awake for a long time imagining everything he'd do once he found the people responsible for the attack. He finally found sleep after repeating his prayer and listening to the rhythmic sound of her breathing.

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Two and a half weeks had passed in a blur. Hermione pushed back her meet and greet at Draco's request. And she devoted her time to reworking the manuscript. She stopped sending any correspondence through the mail. There were questions she still needed answers to and she debated if Malfoy truly meant what he said. She didn't think he'd approve of her going to Askaban, but she hardly saw him enough to approach the subject.

Draco worked non-stop trying to track down the box delivery person with Harry and Blaise with no success. Harry never made it over to catch up because they were all working constantly.

There was an unspoken agreement that Draco would sleep with her when he was able to tear away from his work.

He'd crawl into her bed at an unpredictable time of the night, tug her close and fall asleep. She slept the best with him in her bed, so that meant she was also keeping quite the inconsistent sleep pattern. But that's *all* they did, sometimes only for an hour or two because of Draco's erratic schedule.

Narcissa and Pansy's press strategy was a success and Hermione's name was trending positively. Her wizardgram account had picked up thousands of followers after being pictured in *The Daily Prophet*'s article with Draco. "*The Prince of House Malfoy has returned.*"

The image of Hermione signing his book for him, flickered back and forth as they laughed together. And she made sure to cut out every new picture she found in the other publications. They truly looked like friends. He was her friend. Or something like it. She wasn't entirely sure what they were or were not.

She was tempted every night to kiss him when he laid next to her, but if she kissed him, she wouldn't stop after that. There was no way she could. With their looming date a few days post Halloween she didn't know how to act.

It wasn't a real date, but everything else felt real.

She didn't want to ask him to define anything because she wasn't entirely ready to define her own feelings, so she didn't push it farther and neither did he.

He woke before she did each morning and she went to bed before him each night, even when she stayed up half the night working they never were never awake at the same time.

Last night he came to bed without a shirt on and had it not been three in the morning she might have changed her mind about not kissing him.

Hermione could tell Draco was frustrated with the dead ends they were experiencing and she also knew he felt an enormous amount of guilt over the box of fire. But she was just as much to blame. She shouldn't have opened it without considering the implications. She'd vowed to herself to begin working through the bits and pieces of evidence. She could also begin her own search and perhaps help Draco in the process.

Today was the first night they'd see each other during waking hours and she wouldn't even lie to herself about how happy she was about it.

She tugged up the red sparkling strapless dress. It was almost an exact match to the bombshell cartoon she was dressing up as, Hermione had even smoothed her hair into loose waves, complete with a magical spell that gave her hair a natural red hue. Although she knew no one would understand their costume because of its muggle nature, but she loved how excited Draco was about the whole thing.

"Come out already, I want to see you." Draco knocked on her bedroom door.

"You're so impatient." She huffed as she opened it. Her eyes went wide and her mouth fell open... *Fuck he was so hot.*

Draco stood in red trousers, red suspenders, a yellow polka dot bow tie...and nothing else. His bare chest of honed muscles rippled before her. The costume was complete with magical floppy bunny ears sprouting out of his white blonde hair.

"Roger Rabbit did not look like this." She shook her head. He looked more like a male stripper than he did a cartoon character. Suddenly she questioned every night she'd decided against shagging him.

"Gods I'm a fucking genius." He said as his eyes dragged down the red gown. "You look better than I could have ever imagined." He held her gloved hand, pressing a kiss to it.  
"Thank you for being my date tonight Jessica Rabbit."

She smirked. "Come on, I want to get there early and take some pictures for WizardGram." She pulled him down the hallway toward the floo.

"I don't have one of those yet."

"Oh we should make you one." Hermione smiled, but then stopped herself from grabbing the floo powder. "We need to glamour your tattoo for the evening." She said quietly, brushing her fingers over his arm. Something flashed across his eyes as he said. "Of course." He drew his wand and murmured the spell, making all his tattoos blur away. Hermione pulled her wand out murmuring her own spell aimed at his arm making the dark mark reappear.

"I'm not embarrassed Draco. I just want to keep you safe. Plus this is the only thing we have as an advantage."

"You're right and I'm not offended." He said, but Hermione didn't quite believe him.

"Hermione!" Pansy's gasp echoed through Nott Manor. She stood wearing a thigh high white stockings, a plaid skirt and a cropped quidditch jersey. "You look...fucking hot!"

"That was the goal." Hermione smiled playfully. "And so do you, who knew you were such an athlete?"

Pansy's face screwed up in confusion as Draco stepped out of the floo. "What are you supposed to be?"

"I'm a rabbit, duh." He pointed to his ears. "Her love interest from the movie I told you about." Draco wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist.

"A rabbit dates a supermodel?" Pansy's brow furrowed. "What kind of muggle movie is this?"

Hermione laughed. "Maybe we should watch it together soon. Pansy, will you take our picture?"

Since wizards finally began using their version of the internet, a holographic animated sort of thing displayed from your wand, a simple spell could now take photos digitally and Hermione could not be more grateful. Pansy also took photos on Hermione's muggle phone. Originally she planned to send it to her father a few photos, but after viewing the photo of Draco standing there next to her, his hands clasped in front of his body without a shirt, her leaning against his shoulder the long slit of her dress revealing her entire leg, she quickly changed her mind.

Then she took a selfie of her and Draco just for fun, cheek to cheek with floppy rabbit ears falling into his face.

She didn't have the same cleavage as Jessica Rabbit, but the costume gave her an extra pep in her step as their guests started to arrive.

Nott manor was decked out in all forms of Halloween decorations. Pumpkins of every size littered the perimeter of every room. Fake magical spiders moved along cobwebs as skeletons waved at guests. Black candles flickered hovering along the ceiling.

Everywhere you went there was a room open with things to do and eat. Cauldrons of candy, platters of delicious food, and every liquor you could imagine piled high for your enjoyment. There were poker games starting, board games in another sitting room, and quiet alcoves curtained off for private conversations.

The majority of guests was in the ballroom where Hermione mingled and talked to each person that stopped her. She not only felt beautiful and enjoyed the conversations, but every time Draco caught her eye she felt her pulse jump. His eyes were always on her anytime she looked in his direction and the way his gaze always lingered on her before dragging down her

dress and back up made her skin flash heat. Even from across the room she could feel his gaze on her in the midst of a conversation her spine tingling incessantly as she spoke to Lee Jordan and Seamus Finnigan. Half the room watched Draco's every move. The other half wanted to talk to him any chance they could; she hadn't even tried to talk to him with the long line that seemed to gather wherever he went.

Hermione grabbed a drink and moved towards Theo and Blaise.

"Finally!" Theo shouted, his unicorn horn sparkled wildly as Blaise, who had placed an eye patch over his eye and called himself pirate, opened a small box with a few rolled joints inside. "Now the party can truly start."

Hermione stood in a small circle with Theo, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Blaise, Harry, and Pansy. Theo lit the joint and inhaled.

Draco joined their circle, his hand brushing the small of her back as he slid beside her. It had been an hour since they arrived and she didn't know how to act around him in public.

While he touched her in front of others, it was never quite long enough to mean anything. And with their upcoming date-that-wasn't-a-real-date, she also didn't know if she was supposed to pretend to just be friends, which wasn't really pretending, because they were friends. But when he touched her, it didn't feel like *just* friends.

Hermione tried to ground herself in facts, but she didn't have any facts when it came to their relationship. They were friends, sort of, who randomly supported each other through phone sex once, and had a platonic date in three days. She was confused to say the least.

Ultimately, she decided to reciprocate what he offered. She leaned slightly against his arm as the joint passed around the circle.

"Having fun?" Hermione had to restrain herself from gawking at him, what was it about this costume that made her want to lick his abdomen? She was beginning to become unhinged.

"Yes, I am." Draco replied. "Are you?"

"Quite a lot of fun actually." She smiled brightly.

Harry handed Draco the joint and he inhaled. After he was done he held it out for Hermione, but glanced at her gloves, then moved it towards her mouth. "Allow me to assist you."

She placed her mouth around it and sucked. His fingertips brushed ever slightly against her lips as she inhaled and fuck if it didn't go straight to her core. Perhaps tonight would end very differently than the last couple of weeks. One brief touch and she wanted to fuck him senseless, if his arms were around her tonight while laying in her bed she'd have no control. Draco passed the joint to Pansy who looked at Hermione and said, "You two make everything look sexy."

Hermione rolled her eyes and looked back at Draco a thought occurring to her. "Why have you never come to our party before?" He looked as if he was trying to solve a riddle instead

of answering her question. “The timing never worked out.” He finally said.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here now.” She brushed her gloved fingers against the back of his hand, and his fingers intertwined with hers.

They were holding hands backwards just barely connected at their fingertips, it send a surge of pulsing heat up her arm and down her back and it felt very symbolic of whatever their relationship was.

“Welcome!” Theo shouted as another wave of party guests arrived. That was another thing that had taken up so much of Draco’s time. He set up an even more extensive network of wards over Nott Manor. And personally made Hermione a protection spell for her clothes before he agreed to be on board with the Halloween party.

Theo waved Hermione over to speak with one of their author friends. Malfoy squeezed her fingers slightly before letting go, allowing Hermione freedom to cross the room.

Draco was immediately pulled into a never-ending chain of conversations. She liked watching him interact with others, his face remained polite, no matter who came forward. He never sought out anyone, but he didn’t have to, because everyone wanted to know where he’d been the last five years. They circled each other for almost another hour before they ended up in the same conversation group, standing directly across from each other. She sipped her drink barely able to take her eyes off him.

“He’s gorgeous isn’t he?” Susan Bones said beside her.

“Excuse me?” Hermione choked.

“Malfoy.” Susan whispered. “Did he go to the muggle world to be a model?”

Hermione laughed. “If he didn’t, he probably should have.”

His eyes met hers for several long moments until Harry stepped beside her. He was dressed up as Fluffy, the three headed dog who was still rumored to be guarding the chamber they once snuck into. Harry’s head was the middle dog and he had two animated dog heads on his shoulders. It was an incredible display of magic that made Hermione snort laugh.

“That dog gave me nightmares for a whole year, why do I think it’s so funny now?” She hiccuped. She was in that wonderful space that was slightly tipsy and perfectly high. Not too much of either.

“We should go back to check and see if Fluffy is still scary.” Harry said much too enthusiastically. He was definitely far from sober.

“We cannot make plans like that intoxicated.” Hermione laughed.

“Draco, what have you been up to all these years?” Susan Bones called across the large group of people, it stopped Draco’s conversation with Neville abruptly.

“A lot of reading.” Draco said and a chuckle trickled through the group.

"And what made you come back now?" Cormac McLaggen asked to the left of Hermione.

"I've been watching and waiting for the right opportunity to open up." Draco nodded. "And a few months ago, the timing worked out."

Hermione felt her breath hitch as his eyes slid to hers briefly before returning to his conversation with Neville.

The conservation began to pick up between others as well, turning their large group into smaller ones. The lights turned lower and music started playing as guests gathered to dance in the middle of the room. Another half hour went by before Hermione found herself just a couple meters away from Draco again. In a group conversation with a several others next to her own conversation with Lavender Brown. Hermione was barely registering anything Lavender Brown said about her engagement to Colin Creevey, paying much more attention to Draco's conversation than her own.

Hermione felt a stab of guilt. She wasn't like this, she was a good friend and she needed to act like it. Starting by actually focusing on what her friend was saying and ignoring Draco. It was simple.

"Draco, do you plan to stick around or is your appearance in the wizarding world a short term stint?" Susan Bones asked.

Hermione's plan to focus went flying out the window.

"I'm hoping it's a permanent decision." Draco sipped his firewhiskey next to Susan.

"Well, that's exciting." Susan leaned forward. "Are you..single?" Hermione's jaw tightened.

"Yeah, Malfoy, you dating anyone?" Blaise asked with a teasing chuckle.

Hermione forced herself to keep her eyes fixed on Lavender's, she nodded along trying to maintain the pretense she was fully engaged, but her ears strained to hear Draco's response.

"I'm on a date tonight actually." He replied.

"Oh." Susan laughed stiffly. "With who?"

"Hermione." Draco said much more loudly than necessary. "I'm courting Hermione Granger."

Hermione froze. She could feel eyes from all over the room on her. Even Lavender's eyes tripled in size as she heard Malfoy's words.

"Are you courting Malfoy?" Lavender whisper-screamed at her, grabbing her hand. "You're letting me go on and on about the wedding and yet you haven't said one peep about a courtship with Draco Malfoy?" Her mouth hung open.

"It just happened, very recently." Hermione sputtered. Was this another one of Narcissa approved PR moves? Hermione's head spun with possible reasons Draco would say such a thing.

A slower sultry song began to play and Draco's hand landed on her hip, he pressed his lips next to her ear, "Dance with me witch."

"You go on ahead" Lavender smiled, waving Hermione off with a wink.

The dance floor was crowded and the music was loud as Hermione slid one hand around Draco's neck. He pulled her against his bare chest with a hand low on her back, the other hand wrapping around her own. They swayed to slow music and Hermione tried to ignore the whispers and stares from the other couples on the floor. She smiled at the polka dot bow tie, flicking it with her finger then leaned into him, "So I heard a rumor you're courting me?"

"Not a rumor." He replied, his eyes darkening. "It's like one step up from platonically dating." He shrugged casually which was in direct contrast to how he was looking at her. There was no other way to interpret his look other than full of desire.

"Were you ever going to ask me if I wanted to court you or were you going to just announce it to everyone in the room?" Her eyes darted to his mouth, the urge to kiss him was overwhelming, screaming at her to just do it already. The space between their mouths was so small, but she didn't want their first kiss in months to be in front of so many other people.

"I simply wanted everyone that saw you tonight to know who you belonged to." Draco replied plainly. "Not sure I could have handled Seamus Finnigan staring at you much longer." He lifted his brows, "Problem solved now."

Hermione bit her lip. "You sound jealous."

"No, but I am starving." He lifted their joined hands, and kissed her gloved knuckles. Hermione swallowed. "Would you like something to eat?"

His eyes dropped to her lips. "Yes, I really would."

"Are you craving anything in particular?" Hermione whispered.

His lips dropped to her ear as the song came to an end, "My face buried between your pretty thighs would be a nice start."

Hermione was seconds away from asking him to take her upstairs when Pansy grabbed both of them, tugging them through the crowd and off the dance floor.

She squealed. "Come on, truth or dare is starting in the next room."



# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for every comment and kudos and bookmark! I have been vigorously writing behind the scenes and have more chapters almost ready, but this is to help hold you over until more are complete. My updates will be 1-2 x a week.

Thank you so so much!!

Pansy dragged Draco and Hermione through the hall into a sitting room where Theo and Blaise were haphazardly arranging furniture in the air.

Pansy waved her wand casting a privacy charm over them.

Hermione spoke first. "Draco and I were just leaving." She'd never felt the need to punch Pansy before, but it was very tempting right now.

Pansy shook her head, glaring daggers at Draco. "Courting Draco, really? Do you have any idea how many people are going to race to confirm with your mother? Or perhaps leak it to The Daily Prophet. Have you lost all your senses?"

Draco's smile faltered and his eyes went wide. "Oh shit."

"Yeah. Oh shit." Pansy huffed. "But, because I'm not a bloody idiot like you are, I already informed your mother."

Hermione clapped her hands over her hands. "Oh Merlin." What the fuck happened to her brain around Draco Malfoy? He announced they were courting in front of a bunch of drunken gossips and she melted into his arms. "Was this part of the protection strategy?" She turned to him.

His brow furrowed. "I don't know what I was thinking. I just...I'm so sorry." Draco said, reaching for Hermione's hand. "I should have asked you first." He brushed his thumb over her wrist. "Please forgive me."

Her chest tightened with cold disappointment. She shouldn't be surprised it wasn't real. Suddenly she wanted to hug Pansy. incredibly thankful she interrupted them. Hermione was certain she would have snogged him senseless on the dance floor left to her own devices.

"You didn't even ask her yet?" Pansy smacked Draco into the chest.

"I planned to ask her on our date!" Draco shook his head. "But then every fucking wizard in here was looking at her and I- I-"

"So you announced an unplanned courtship because you were being territorial?" Pansy snapped. "How you'll survive Narcissa's reaction I'm not sure." Pansy pinched the bridge of her nose. "A courtship announcement with Hermione Granger where you didn't even ask Hermione Granger's permission. I can see the headlines already."

"My mother already knows how I feel about Hermione. She shouldn't be that surprised." Draco rolled his eyes.

Hermione was experiencing the strangest sort of emotional whiplash. That secret chamber of her mind was beginning to feel too big. She always pictured it like a bank vault, but those iron walls were beginning to bow.

Would this be a particularly bad time to ask if he still hated her?

Or if he could apologize for that letter he wrote to her while in Azkaban?

Or should she start by mentioning that the only reason she saw a mind healer to begin with was because of that letter?

She needed to restrain herself because after those questions were answered, inappropriate things were left in that vault. Things that were harder to explain.

"And...how do you feel about me?" Hermione asked tentatively.

Draco looked...was he blushing? He didn't so much as falter talking about licking her cunt but now he was suddenly blushing like a schoolboy caught in a lie. Wait, was he lying? Was this for a cover? Had she misunderstood him this whole time?

"It's complicated when it comes to you." He said, swallowing. Oh.

Her face fell. Of course it would be complicated. She was Hermione Granger and he was Draco Malfoy. They'd always be different.

"Oh you two are bloody fucking idiots." Pansy snapped. "This is painful to watch. You two have about five minutes to get your story straight because both of you are playing truth or dare and Draco just laid claim to you in front of everyone so if you could just figure out the details, I have a feeling everyone is going to want to know how you two started courting!"

Draco stared at Hermione, opening and closing his mouth. Panic was settling behind his eyes. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make this harder for you. I'm so stupid. I'm so sorry. We can leave. Let's just leave."

"Then hell you are." Pansy snapped, you will not announce you're courting Hermione Granger and leave a party. Everyone will think it's fake!"

"It is fake, right?" Hermione asked. She should have asked these questions on the dance floor but her brain was nowhere to be seen on the dance floor. All she could think about was his lips on her, the weight of his hands on her body. His minty breath lingering on her neck.

"I don't know what I was thinking." Draco looked distressed. "I couldn't handle McLaggen winking at you."

"I can't take this anymore. Draco." Pansy snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Do you want to ask Hermione officially?"

"Yes, but we haven't exactly talked about what courtship means." Draco squeezed her hand.

Hermione's head was spinning now. "You want to be more than friends?"

"Granger, I've been sleeping with you for weeks. I don't do that with my friends."

"You've been sleeping with him?" Pansy's mouth dropped open. "And you didn't tell me?"

"Platonically!" Hermione shifted on her feet. "Draco and I...sort of and I... I don't know." She huffed. This was very confusing and very frustrating.

"Why do you keep using that word?" Pansy scoffed. "Did you lose the brain matter responsible for that specific word's definition? There is nothing platonic about you two." She gestured at their joined hands. Hermione forgot they had been holding hands through this whole conversation.

Hermione looked at Draco, hoping to get help explaining their situation and he was opening and closing his mouth again, looking more flabbergasted than she had ever seen him.

His expression was a mixture of confusion and overwhelm and her stomach sank.

"It's okay." Hermione stated. "We can pretend. It's a good cover. I mean that was the plan right?"

"Draco, do you like Hermione?" Pansy snapped.

"A great deal." Draco said

"Hermione, do you like Draco?"

Hermione blushed and felt it all the way down her neck. "As more than a friend?"

"Yes, Granger as more than fucking friends. Are we in primary school?" Pansy rolled her eyes.

"I think that depends on Draco's answer."

"I just said I fancy you." Draco tugged on her hand.

"Okay. I'm done." Pansy pressed her hands over face. "You two are hopeless. You have a few minutes to decide what details you'll share and what's real or not real, but I expect both of you in those chairs. And you need to share your relationship on the wizarding web before the fucking Daily Prophet does."

Pansy huffed as she walked away, her nose in the air muttering to herself about communication books.

Hermione slowly met Draco's gaze. When he looked at her it was like the world melted away and she forgot about who he was and who she was and all that mattered was touching him. Like he wasn't real until she could feel his skin beneath her fingertips.

"I want to kiss you." She whispered and then her eyes widened painfully as she realized she said it out loud. "Oh." She smacked a hand over her mouth.

Draco cupped her face, a warm wave flooding through her chest, twisting down her spine.

His thumb brushed over her cheek bone, swiping across the edge of mouth. "I have thought about nothing else but kissing you since the first time I kissed you." He whispered.

She felt the corner of her mouth tug. "We could leave, you know. We could sneak out."

"I'm not sure either of us would survive Pansy's wrath."

"Well I don't want to leave my houseguest starving. I didn't realize I was being so rude." She leaned into him, placing a hand on his chest. It wasn't enough. She hated the gloves she was wearing.

"You're so beautiful." He leaned forward and she stepped onto her toes. Their noses brushed before Hermione jerked away at the sound of her name.

"Mione!" Ron's voice made all that warmth in her chest run cold. *Fuck*.

She was feeling completely unsatisfied and it was painful to pull away from Draco.

"Hi Ron. Daphne." Hermione nodded to the couple who both wore a crown and matching grey dress robes. "Wizards chess. A great costume."

Draco was a bit stiff next to her until she intertwined their fingers and felt him relax. And truthfully she felt better too that way.

She expected Ron's face to be strawberry red from anger, but he simply stared at their joined hands. He held his temper in check. Perhaps he was making progress in that area now as a professional businessman.

Daphne was the ever high society socialite and smiled as sweetly as a snake. "So the rumors are true. You're courting a muggleborn."

Hermione scoffed. The way she said muggle born was the same way she'd say mudblood.

"I already told Daphne it was a cover, it wasn't believable. The two of you together." Ron waved between them.

Hermione realized they still had not come to a conclusion on what exactly they were or were not. And she couldn't trust her brain at the moment because she was still lost in that foggy place her mind went to with Draco. How she managed to not fuck him already was beyond her. It was order of Merlin worthy. Truly she dared any witch in her position to spend weeks in his arms and resist him. She was bloody stupid.

"No, it's true. We are courting." Draco said, but looked at her for confirmation, his thumb rubbing over the satin glove. Hermione desperately just wanted his skin against hers. She squeezed his hand.

"Not as a cover." Hermione tried to sound confident but even to her own ears she could hear the question in her tone.

"Not as a cover." He replied, smiling sheepishly.

"Right." Hermione couldn't help grin back. What was becoming of her. She was being ridiculous. She'd never acted this way before about a boy.

"Does she even know what it means to be courted by you? How could she? And what about your mother's approval?" Daphne scoffed.

"Stop talking about me like I'm not standing in front of you." Hermione shook her head. She wracked her brain for all the information she'd read on pure blood courtships.

Okay, so that would be nothing.

She'd never read anything on courtships. It all seemed misogynistic and ridiculous.

"What's your timeline for courtship like?" Daphne demanded. Ron simply stood there glowering at... not Draco, but Hermione. She hadn't seen him look at her like that since... since she broke up with him.

"We are taking things slow." Draco said, glancing at Hermione.

"Yes." Hermione nodded. "Slow." Her blood heated at memories of being slow with Draco.

"What was your timeline like?" Hermione countered. "Did Ron ask you to court him traditionally?"

Daphne sneered triumphantly as if Hermione had lost out on Ron's courtship.

"First he didn't ask me, he asked my father. Which is the first step in courting. And we began courting in May. Ron is quite romantic, he officially offered me the contract while we were on our first date. We had all the same requirements and values for the contract. It didn't even need to be revised once. That's how compatible we are."

Hermione snorted. And then composed herself. "I'm genuinely happy for you. That sounds quite romantic. Contracts always make me feel warm and fuzzy too."

"You're making fun of me, I realize, but it just demonstrates how ignorant you are. Clearly you have no business being courted by a Malfoy."

"I'm not sure that's for you to decide really." Hermione said. "When you accepted Ron's contract was that before or after Narcissa rejected your fifth request for courting Draco? I was there you know. At the manor when that last one came in. Your plea for courtship was really moving."

Daphne gasped. "Ron, are you going to let her talk to me like that?"

"Hermione, that was a really low blow." Ron managed to say. His eyes, full of unmasked disdain. "It's not like you're unfamiliar with Malfoy's rejections either. It's interesting that now of all times he wants you to be under his thumb."

"Alright witches and wizards take your seats!" Pansy's amplified voice spread through the room.

Hermione faltered. That stung and Ron knew it. He knew exactly how to open old wounds and keep them hurting. He was the king of low blows. He wore a fucking crown literally in front of her.

"Well Ron I have to say you really found the right match for you. You were right when you said she was perfect for you in every way." Hermione smiled bitterly. She was not jealous but she did pity herself for staying in a relationship with him for as long as she did. Daphne deserved Ron's ire.

Daphne straightened her shoulders. "I'm going to find our seats." She held her head high as she walked away.

"You're oddly silent Malfoy. Won't even defend Hermione?"

"Oh the things I want to say would probably send me back to Azkaban." Draco smiled coldly as he leaned towards him. "It's strange though she needs to be defended when it comes to you. You're supposed to be her friend and yet you let Daphne insult her without care?"

"Hermione blindsided both of us without telling me anything about courting you. It was extremely offensive to hear about this through the rumor mills."

"Take your seats, everyone! Draco and Hermione get your asses in those seats." Pansy gave a pointed look in their direction. Ron yanked Hermione's wrist before they could walk away.

"Hermione. We need to talk about this before you do something that ruins your life."

"If you'd like to keep your arm Weasley, I suggest you take your hand off of my witch." Draco's cold voice didn't have to be loud to be threatening.

Ron laughed dryly as he let go of her. "See that Hermione? Do you see how possessive he already is? Ron glared at him as he let go. "Are you threatening me for touching her? She's

one of my oldest friends and I can touch her if I want. You're a little too possessive if you ask me.” Ron’s jaw tightened.

“You can touch her if *she* wants to be touched, you don’t get to decide that for her.” Draco sneered. “And you have no idea how possessive I can be. So I suggest you ask next time before touching her.

Ron laughed again, throwing his hands up in mock fear. “Oh no!” He whined. “Is the big bad death eater going to come for me? I’d love to see you try.”

Ron started to walk away and stopped. “Enjoy my sloppy seconds Malfoy.”

“Oh I will.” Draco smiled viciously. “Everyday. Multiple times a day.”

Hermione shivered.

Ron’s face finally betrayed him as his face flushed an angry red and stormed off.

Draco held Hermione's hand as they walked the perimeter of furniture; there were no more spaces next to each other. Draco walked Hermione to an empty chair and waited for her to sit before kneeling down on one knee in front of her.

People were staring and one person loudly whispered “Is he going to propose?” Causing more people to crane their necks.

“Oh shit. You’re not going to propose now are you?” Hemrione’s cheeks heated, trying to avoid the gazes of the onlookers as Draco leaned towards her.

Draco arched a brow, “Do you want me to?” Hermione rolled her eyes.

He laid a hand on her bare thigh, stroking the top of her leg with his thumb. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t think about the impact it would have on you. I’ll make it up to you, I promise. We are both bound to get some questions about our relationship. Remember to think about who is asking the question and how much you want to reveal. I trust you.” He squeezed her leg and took a seat directly across from her. The heat of his hand stayed imprinted on her thigh like she’d been branded long after he sat down. Hermione watched as he pulled up his newly made WizardGram account, projecting a small image in front of him. She couldn’t see which picture he was sharing, but she knew it was of the two of them and even though it was backwards she could read his one word caption as he pressed share.

*Mine.*

Pansy strode to the center of the elongated circle. “Wizards and Witches, I’ll explain the rules only once so listen up!”

## Chapter 16

“You are all entering this game of your own free will.” Pansy stated, glancing around the room.

*Well that wasn’t entirely true...*

A crowd had gathered behind the participants' seats.

Cormac McLaggen sent Hermione a wink as he took the last remaining chair next to Ron. God he was such an idiot. He was going to ruin everything with his stupid winking.

Pansy continued, “When challenging a person you state their full name and offer the choice of truth or dare. You must have a plan for both, if you take too long to come up with something you’ll forfeit your turn. You may only challenge one person per round. Make it count. The person challenged will decide if they will accept or pass whatever you offer them. If they pass they’re removed from the game. Every round you’ll donate to the winner’s fund, the winners at the end split the pot. First round is 20 galleons. And it doubles every round. Be specific with how you ask your questions and how you state your dares. The person being challenged is free to interpret your question or dare creatively and is not required to offer follow up information. The crowd will be used as the judge if someone feels as though their question wasn’t answered or dare completed.” Pansy looked at the participants. “I’ll collect your entry fee and if you have questions now is the time to ask.”

Pansy walked around the group and they each handed over their money. She was about to skip Hermione, when Hermione grabbed Pansy by the arm. Pansy explained in a rushed whisper. “Draco paid yours already.” Hermione opened her mouth to argue. “Don’t you even think about fighting this, Hermione. You’re courting a Malfoy and you’re his to pay for, if you were to pay, it would make him look bad.”

Hermione huffed in defeat. How many rules are there in a courtship? There was something exhilarating about being called his. Even if he hadn’t necessarily asked permission.

Hermione might truly be an idiot for participating in this game when she knew nothing about the extent of their relationship or the rules she needed to follow.

“Let the games begin!” Pansy cheered. “I’ll do the honor of starting the game off properly.”

Pansy sat on a couch next to Padma Patil as her smile became cheeky.

“Ginerva Weasley, truth or dare.”

Ginny straightened in her seat. “Truth.”

Pansy arched her brow. “Are you single?”

Ginny chuckled. "Completely unattached." *Ohhh. Oh. My gosh.* Theo whistled. Hermione's brows rose as she looked between her friends and quickly scanned the room considering what information she wanted to gain tonight. Perhaps these Slytherins had the right idea with this game.

"Now we move clockwise." Pansy looked at Padma. "You're up Patil."

Padma's eyes landed on Hermione. "Hermione Granger. Truth or dare?"

"Dare." Hermione replied.

"Perfect. I dare you to take a shot with me."

"I would love to." Hermione laughed and stood. Theo whistled again. Someone from the crowd handed over two shots. Hermione hesitated as she sniffed the liquid.

"I watched them pour." Harry said, giving her the thumbs up.

"To hearing your secrets, Hermione." Padma smirked, clicking the shot glasses together. Hermione threw the alcohol back, grimacing slightly at the after taste.

"You're trying to loosen my lips?" Hermione wiped her mouth as she handed the shot glass back.

"Sure am." Padma winked, sitting back down. "I want all the details of your courtship."

*So did Hermione coincidentally.*

Harry was next. "Ron Weasley. Truth or dare."

Ron's eyes narrowed, leaning back in his chair. "Truth."

"What's your current income?" Harry asked without hesitation.

Ron smirked. "Just about to hit a multi seven figure year."

"Holy shit." Someone exclaimed from behind Hermione's chair. "Who knew a joke shop could perform so well."

"Alright, Angelina Johnson." Pansy said keeping them on track. Angelina's eyes were already on Malfoy. "I'm surprised to see you here Malfoy." She said, her expression unreadable.

"Surprise." He replied. He was relaxed causally in his seat, an ankle crossed over his knee.

"Truth or Dare." Angelina challenged.

"Truth." He said quickly.

"Why did you leave the wizarding world?" A murmur of anticipation rippled through the room.

"I didn't. Not truly anyway. I was around. I just didn't want to be seen." He said. More whispers began to grow, but Pansy cleared her throat and the room fell quiet again.

All eyes went to Hermione who was next to challenge someone. Her eyes landed on brown ones. Hermione leaned on the arm of her chair, crossing her legs.

"Hi Anthony."

"Hi." Anthony Goldstein shifted in his seat, his eyes darting down Hermione's legs before flicking to Draco.

"Does your grandfather still work on the board governing Azkaban?" Hermione asked, offering a pretty smile.

"Yeah he does." he said.

"Oh okay. Anthony Goldstien truth or dare." Hermione smiled wider and Anthony realized his mistake.

"You're tricky." Anthony laughed nervously, his eyes flicked to Draco again. "Truth."

"Are you part of The Brotherhood?" Hermione asked.

Anthony grew a little smug. "Yeah. I am. Just ranked as an officer actually."

"Oh wow and how does one increase their rank?" Hermione's amazement was a little over the top, but he was buying it.

"Oh uh. It's a secret..." Anthony's eyes flew wide as if he made a mistake, his head whipped to Ron. Ron's posture was casual, but the look he was giving Anthony was anything but.

"It's a private system." Ron said with forced politeness. "I believe your turn is over Hermione."

"Oh, right. My bad." She smiled apologetically.

"And that is how you play this game." Theo said with an awed laugh. "Brilliant as always Granger."

"Next up!" Pansy said.

Lee Jordan dared Romilda Vane to share the last person she searched on Wizardgram.

It was Draco Malfoy.

The crowd burst into a frenzy as everyone realized Draco had a newly debuted account. Everyone in the room had their wands out projecting his latest post. Hermione followed suit, briefly glancing at Draco before pulling up the one and only image he'd shared. It was a candid shot of him and Hermione at the beginning of the party. Hermione had asked Draco if

anything was in her teeth, and he had held her chin smiling down at her, floppy bunny ears and rippling abs on display as Hermione stared up at him with a toothy grin.

*Mine.* His caption stated. Gods. Her stomach fluttered wildly. She couldn't help the smile that was tugging at her lips as she looked at the photo. It was a bit silly all things considered, but the way he was looking at her... *Mine*.

"Truth or dare Draco Malfoy." Marcus Flint said, a crude smile on his face.

"Truth." Draco replied.

Marcus nodded towards Hermione. "Is she that good in bed? Is your legacy worth it?"

Draco smiled genuinely. "My legacy is infinitely better because of her."

On Hannah Abbott's turn she looked between Draco and Hermione for a full minute.

"Hurry up Abbott" Pansy tapped her foot.

Her gaze landed on Hermione. "It's strange to hear about your courtship Hermione." Hannah looked entirely unconvinced they were courting. Hermione waited for a question. "Will you share how you started courting Draco Malfoy of all people?"

Hermione was prepared for this question. "We met in the muggle world." She glanced at Draco who watched her curiously. "It was quite random actually. We were friends first and now we are more than friends." That was pretty truthful. The crowd loudly whispered to one another. Hermione tried to block it out.

Luna was next. "Truth or dare, Harry Potter."

"Dare." Harry grinned.

"I dare you to go Nargle hunting with me. It will help the anxiety that's coming from your aura."

"Okay." He shrugged. "Deal."

Romilda Vane was ready instantly. "Hermione Granger truth or dare."

"Truth." Hermione said. The look on Romilda's face gave Hermione the sense to proceed cautiously.

"Do you remember what Draco Malfoy did to Katie Bell? Do you remember how she spent months of her life in St. Mungos because of him?" She asked, voice full of indignation.

Hermione shifted in her seat. "Yes, I do."

Romilda sneered at her. "I was hoping you'd forgotten, but that's just sad you remember and still agreed to court him." Another wave of loud murmuring began before Pansy quieted the crowd.

“Pansy Parkinson, truth or dare.” Ginny smiled at the witch widely.

“Dare.” Pansy arched her brow.

“I dare you to play quidditch with me Friday afternoon.”

“Um. I don’t really do sports.” Pansy frowned.

“But you look so good in a quidditch jersey.” Ginny leaned back in her chair shamelessly looking over Pansy’s costume.

“Alright, fine.” Pansy smiled shyly. “Your flattery worked. I’ll do it.” When did Pansy ever look shy?

Susan Bones laughed at something Daphne whispered into her ear and then her eyes went to Malfoy.

“Truth or dare Draco Malfoy.” Susan said.

“Dare.” He replied. Hermione had no idea how he seemed so relaxed. Nothing seemed to ruffle him.

Susan smiled. “I dare you to kiss Hermione in front of us. If you’re really courting, it shouldn’t be a problem right?”

Draco rolled his eyes. He stood and walked towards Hermione. Her heart pounded in her chest. She was about to stand up, but he shook his head just slightly. He gently grabbed Hermione’s hand and pressed a kiss on the satin gloves. Hermione was only slightly disappointed. Okay maybe a little more than slightly.

“That’s all you get to see.” Draco chuckled as he took his seat.

“Well that’s not what I meant.” Susan said, annoyed.

“Then you should have been more specific.” Draco shrugged.

Daphne sat on the edge of her seat waiting to strike “Truth or dare, Hermione Granger.”

“Dare.”

Daphne pursed her lips and then after a moment said, “I dare you to show us the courting contract Draco surely offered you if it was a real courtship.”

“Alright.” Hermione summoned her purse. As she dug through it she wordlessly transformed her manuscript to be smaller and charmed it to say Malfoy and Granger Courtship.”

She couldn’t help but feel a wave of warm pride when she saw Draco’s arrogant smirk in place.

“Hand it over.” Daphne demanded.

“No, you said show. Not read.” Hermione replied and placed it back into her bag.

Ron scanned the room slowly. He finally looked at Harry and chuckled. “I was going to ask how often you think Draco called Hermione a mudblood growing up, but it might be too many times to count.” Hermione’s stomach tightened as a shocked murmur ran through the crowd. Draco’s eyes fell to his lap, face going cold as stone.

“Truth or dare Harry Potter.” Ron dragged Harry’s name out mockingly.

“Dare.” Harry sat up straighter, holding Ron’s stare.

“When we snuck into the Slytherin dungeons as Crabbe and Goyle, we spoke to Draco Malfoy, I dare you to repeat the exact words Malfoy said about certain mudbloods dying.”

“Can you stop saying that word?” Hermione snapped.

Harry shook his head. “Pass.” He spat out, disgusted.

Ron gave a cocky grin and glanced at Hermione. She glared at him and he rolled his eyes, reaching for his drink.

Cormac McLaggen grinned with Ron offering him a fist bump before looking around the room. He winked at Hermione before landing on Draco.

“Truth or dare Draco Malfoy.”

Draco didn’t try to hide his disdain. “Dare.”

“I dare you to,” he paused, considering his words. “I dare you to share how you asked Hermione to be in a courtship.”

Draco’s expression shifted as he glanced at Hermione. “I simply told her I wanted to be more than friends.”

A few voices from the crowd oohed and awed at his response and others began whispering more theories about them.

Draco was next and Hermione’s stomach fluttered as his silver eyes went to her. “Hermione Granger.” He purred. “Truth or dare.” She swallowed as her brain flashed memories of their first truth or dare game.

“Truth.” She was so cliche every time she chose the truth but she didn’t care.

“Will you go to the Christmas Gala with me as my date?”

Her smile was unrestrained as her cheeks flushed. “Yes.” She replied. The room buzzed with conversation like a beehive, there were a few cheers and the talk began growing rapidly. Theo whistled to quiet them down.

Anthony Goldstein looked at Theo. “Truth or Dare Theo Nott.”

“Truth.”

“What kind of work do you do for Hermione?”

Theo eyed him cautiously before smiling. “I help her get her books published.”

“Even books that promote ideologies ruining wizarding culture?” McLaggen added. “As a pureblood wizard I’m surprised you’re involved with her at all.”

Theo gave him a cold smile but he didn’t respond to McLaggen’s bait.

Lastly, it was Theo’s turn. He looked at Hermione with a smile on his face before his eyes flicked to Draco. “Truth or dare Draco Malfoy.”

Draco arched his brow. “Truth.”

“So we can get this over with and for everyone’s fucking curiosity,” Theo rolled his eyes. “Are you really and truly dating Hermione Granger?”

Draco’s eyes slid to hers, then roamed over her body and Hermione’s skin heated down to her toes.

“Yes, I am.” The crowd erupted like wildfire spreading quickly. If anyone hadn’t heard about their courtship, there was no one who wouldn’t know now. Gods she really hoped Narcissa would forgive them

Tonight would be very different between them. So much had changed this evening and even though there were many details that needed to be figured out, Hermione was very excited to go home with Draco Malfoy tonight.

Her stomach tightened as she caught Ron’s eye, he shook his head in disgust. She knew exactly what he was thinking about. If she were honest she still felt the apprehension of trusting Draco, but she wanted to try to trust him. Hermione shouldn’t have to explain why he made her happy. She didn’t owe anyone an explanation. Except apparently in this game where she was required to, but she wouldn’t let anyone make her feel guilty about it.

The next round began. Pansy asked Daphne when she and Ron were getting married.

“On Valentine’s day.” She cooed, glancing at Ron, but he was too busy glaring at Malfoy to respond to her.

Padma asked Theo out on a date.

Theo, who Hermione would normally consider the world’s biggest flirt would have relished in the attention but was completely shocked when he shook his head politely. “I’ve been seeing someone and even though we don’t have a label yet, I’m not going to date others at the moment.”

Padma’s face grew warm. “Alright I’m out.” She covered her face with her hands. “One shot in and I didn’t even check to see if you’re single.”

Hermione's mouth opened as she stared at Theo. "You're dating someone." She hissed.

"You're courting someone." He hissed in return.

Angelina Johnson dared Hannah Abbot to kiss her Hogwarts crush "I can't." She glanced at Draco. "I pass." She said glumly.

When it was Hermione's turn again she turned to Marcus Flint.

"Truth or Dare, Marcus Flint." Hermione said.

"Truth." He hesitated slightly. "Or wait, dare."

"Well which is it?"

"Truth." He nodded.

"What was the last project you worked on in the department of magical artifacts?"

His eyes narrowed suspiciously as his lip curled. "Pass." He crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair in defeat.

When Lee Jordan challenged Hermione she chose truth.

"When will you be making it publicly official that you're courting Malfoy?" He said. "You haven't shared anything online."

"I think I'll share tomorrow." She shrugged.

"You think?" Daphne scoffed. "How do you not know? How do you not have a plan?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Not all relationships have to have a plan."

It was Luna's turn and she smiled sweetly as she looked at Draco.

"Draco Malfoy. You look happy." She said.

"I am happy." Hermione's heart rate sped up watching him smile in return.

"Truth or dare."

"Truth." Draco said.

"Do you remember when I was kidnapped and brought to your home?" Draco's face faltered.

"Yes, I do." His expression became guarded. The crowd had gone completely silent.

"I do too. I just thought everyone should know that when Voldemort told Draco to torture me, he didn't and when he didn't torture me. He was punished for it."

Draco's jaw feathered as he looked at his hands, his face went void of all emotions again.

Romilda Vane asked Pansy, sneering at her, "Were you part of Draco's plans when he tried to kill Buckbeak?"

"No I was not." Pansy rolled her eyes.

Ginny dared Angelina Johnson. "Tell George you're pregnant!" The crowd cheered. "Tell George! Tell George!"

Angelina's face fell. "Pass! No way!"

Susan Bones smiled condescendingly towards Hermione. "Most people will assume you're after Malfoy's money...It's still hard to believe you two are courting. What do you offer him?"

Hermione smiled, "Free books." The crowd laughed in unison.

Daphne was steaming with annoyance. "Truth or dare, Hermione Granger."

"Truth." Hermione wanted to laugh at Daphne's expression. Her and Ron both had tempers it seemed.

"Courting is considered a stepping stone to marriage, are you planning to marry Draco Malfoy?" Hermione's heart slammed into her chest and began skipping irregularly. She couldn't risk looking at Draco. She wouldn't be able to handle whatever expression his face held, especially the ones void of emotions.

"I guess you'll have to wait and see." Hermione replied, willing her breathing to stay steady.

"You didn't answer the question." She looked around the room for support. "That wasn't a fair answer to the question."

The crowd cheered and someone shouted. "She's right. Answer the question!"

"Are you two planning to marry?" Daphne repeated.

Hermione breathed slowly. "We have no stipulation of marriage in our courting agreement."

Daphne smirked as if Hermione had revealed pertinent information.

Ron looked at Hermione with a calculated smile. "Hermione, do you remember when you asked me to help Malfoy get permits for the floo system to the restaurant he owns because he couldn't get them himself?"

Hermione stared at him.

"Truth or Dare Hermione." Ron said, forcing casualness in his tone.

“Truth.” She’d take his bait. She already knew where this was going.

“Were you aware that one week after you moved into your flat Draco Malfoy purchased a restaurant just a few streets away from your home?” Ron smirked as a ripple of murmurs went through the crowd.

“Yes, I was.” Hermione stated. “That’s actually where we met.”

“It’s a pretty creepy coincidence.” He gritted out, his smirk falling after not getting the reaction he thought he’d get. Ron’s anger grew less controlled the more he drank.

“Or perhaps fate.” Hermione grinned back.

Ron’s glare was filled with unrestrained anger. Daphne placed her hand on top of Ron’s, but he jerked away. “Go get me a drink.” He barked.

“Of course, dear.” Daphne kissed his forehead. “I’d be happy to.”

McLaggen was next. He asked Theo “When was the first time Draco and Hermione shagged?”

“Could you be any more unoriginal?” Theo rolled his eyes. “Pass.”

Then it was Draco’s turn. His eyes went to Hermione and her pulse began fluttering as rapidly as a snitch’s wings. His smug smile made her grit her teeth. He was going to challenge her, she could see the mischief dancing in his eyes. He would dare her to do something outrageous. Or perhaps ask her something embarrassing. She didn’t know which was the safer option.

“Hermione Granger.” For the love of Godrick the way he said her name made her something heat low in her stomach. “Truth or dare.”

Dare was on the tip of her tongue, but she hesitated and she could see the smug smile beginning to grow.

“Truth.” She finally said. He smiled wide in satisfaction and her stomach flipped in response. His smile was her absolute favorite. It was such a beautiful smile, especially when directed at her like that. Draco nonchalantly pulled a caramel apple lolly from his pocket and he ripped off the paper, popping it into his mouth. Hermione swore the entire room moaned in response. Or maybe that was just the moan inside her head. He pulled it out of his mouth slowly.

“Do you know where I live, Hermione?”

Her whole body stilled, her eyes went wide before she schooled her features. She took it back. That smile was rude and irritating.

*He knew. Oh holy shit. He knew that she knew. Fuck. Shit. Fuck.*

There was a confused chuckle in the room.

“What kind of question is that?” Daphne hissed.

Hermione could lie, but Draco told her about the restaurant. Perhaps she should reward his truthfulness with her own.

“Yes. I do.” She kept her tone and face neutral, but loved watching his eyes heat in response. *How did he know?* He swirled the lolly in his mouth. Gods she wanted this game to be done, the only reason she hadn’t left was because it was proving to be worth her time with all the information she was gathering. That and she was quite competitive.

Anthony Goldstein grabbed everyone’s attention by asking Pansy. “I heard Hermione is having some safety issues lately.” The room hummed in response. “Do you think Draco Malfoy is a risk to her safety?”

“No I do not.” Pansy held her chin high. “I think the exact opposite actually. I’d love to see someone try to hurt Hermione while Draco is around.”

The third round began and Pansy asked Romilda Vane if the rumors were true that her mother cheated on her father. She passed with an angry glower.

It was Hermione’s turn again. She watched the lolly in Draco’s mouth. There was only one thing she wanted right now.

“Draco Malfoy, truth or dare” Murmuring oohs rippled behind her through the crowd.

He quirked a brow. “Dare.”

“Oh give it to him, good Granger.” Theo shouted.

“I dare you to give me your lolly.” Hermione chuckled.

“Is that it?” Draco’s self satisfied smile made Hermione’s stomach flutter again. Her body seemed to be made of butterflies when he looked at her.

“Too easy!” Someone shouted.

“Sorry, I wasn’t finished. Give me your lolly without using your hands.” She said, attempting to mimic his own arrogant drawl.

It was Hermione’s turn to wear a self satisfied smile as the room erupted in cheers.

Genuine surprise flashed across Draco’s face and then it morphed into that sneer-smile combo.

“Okay, come and get it.” He tapped his leg.

“That’s not fair.” Hermione’s smugness vanished as quickly as it had come. How did he twist this around so fast?

"You didn't specify." Draco shrugged. With a quick twist of his mouth the lolly faced outward and he bit down on the stick.

"He's right." Pansy looked disappointed. "You should have been more specific"

A ripple of whistles and oohs came from everyone around her. "Do it. Do it." Some began to chant

Hermione stood and walked across the space as confidently as possible, praying to Godrick she didn't fall in her heels in front of everyone.

"This is ridiculous." Ron grumbled.

"Ridiculously hot." Mcglaggen responded and there was a round of agreements from others.

Hermione stood between Draco's legs. He could see her hesitation and he started to smile wider. *What a prat.*

Hermione sat slowly on his lap and enjoyed the way his eyes quickly heated as she placed a hand on his bare chest and leaned forward.

She opened her mouth, carefully wrapping her mouth around the candy. And then just because she could, she leaned in a bit more and brushed her lips against his before pulling the sucker out of his mouth. It wasn't nearly enough of a proper kiss and it made her whole body hum with need for more.

The room erupted in a variety of cheers.

"Fuck yeah, Hermione!" Ginny clapped.

"Lucky bitch." Some else hissed. Hermione could barely suppress her laughter as she stood up, but she didn't get very far. Draco's arm snaked around her waist, pulling her right back down, keeping her on his lap.

"Where do you think you're going?" He whispered into her ear, pressing a kiss to her temple. She shivered, wanting to feel the full weight of his mouth on hers again.

Lee Jordan coughed as the attention moved back to the game. "Luna Lovegood. Truth or dare."

"Dare."

"Do you truly believe in Nargles? I dare you to give us any real proof of their existence."

Luna smiled and said. "Pass." without any further explanation.

"Well that's telling." He responded laughing loudly.

Ginny frowned at him. "Truth or dare, Lee Jordan."

“Truth.”

“I heard rumors of you sleeping with one of your coworker’s wives. Is that true?” His smile fell and he passed.

Susan Bones dared McLaggen to switch places with Hermione. He passed with one glance at Draco.

Daphne glared at Hermione, then turned and challenged Ginny, who chose truth.

“Will you be a bridesmaid for our wedding?” Daphne smiled wide.

“Of course.” Ginny nodded politely.

Ron’s features were tight as he challenged Draco, he tightly gripped his glass of alcohol. Hermione leaned against Draco’s chest, enjoying the heat of his body as his fingers began lazily circling her thigh, his arm tightening around her waist.

“Truth or dare Malfoy.”

“Truth.”

“Do you think that you should apologize to me for my brother dying? Do you think you should apologize to all of us for how much you disgraced the wizarding legacy?”

“Specify which question I’m supposed to answer.” Draco replied.

Ron let out a low unnerving chuckle. “Do you think you deserve forgiveness for all of the ways you contributed to ruining the wizarding world?”

Ron’s ire was on full display. Hermione squeezed Draco’s hand, rubbing her thumb over his palm.

“No. I don’t believe I do.” Draco said. Ron must have expected some other reaction because he scoffed and roughly gulped down his drink.

“Truth or dare Weasley.” Draco drawled.

“Dare.” Ron laughed with bitter amusement. .

“I dare you to share the secrets to your success as a business owner.” Malfoy asked, his condescension obvious to anyone in the room.

“My success is based on building strong relationships and oh, not being a death eater.” Ron spat.

“Alright let’s move on.” Pansy said, looking at Anthony.

Anthony Goldstein gave Pansy a flirty smile, sipping his drink. “Truth or dare, Parkinson.”

“Dare.” Pansy eyes narrowed.

“Kiss me.” He said.

Pansy cackled. “Easy pass.” Anthony frowned and grumbled to himself while sipping his drink.

Hermione was next and challenged Daphne. “When was the first time you and Ron slept together?”

Daphne lifted her nose in the air “None of your business. Pass.”

Ginny asked Susan Bones “Can you explain why you recently got fired from your job?”

“Pass.” Susan scoffed.

Ron glared at Draco. “Truth or Dare Malfoy”

“Truth”

“You seem to have one failed life event after another.” Ron said, swirling his drink, the ice clinking against the glass. “What would you say is your biggest failure?”

Draco replied plainly. “Taking the dark mark.”

Anthony Goldstein leaned forward in his chair. “Truth or dare Granger.”

“Truth.” She said.

“When was the last time you slept with Malfoy?”

Her cheeks heated. “He slept in my bed last night.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.” He rolled his eyes. Hermione shrugged.

It was Draco’s turn and the crowd all held their breath as he challenged Ginny.

“Truth.” She said, watching Draco carefully.

“Theo and I are hosting a dinner party for our friends next month. Would you like to come?”

Her surprise morphed into a polite smile. “Yes, I would. Thank you.”

It was Hermione’s turn. “Truth or Dare Ron Weasley.”

“Truth.” Ron’s eyes raked over her and Draco’s joined hands.

Hermione considered for a moment. “Who helped you get the floo permits for my book release party?” It was very direct, but Hermione was hoping that between Ron being completely drunk and fairly slow when it came to her plans he wouldn’t follow her inquiry.

The question caught him off guard based on his confused expression. “Uh, I think it was Samson Rockwood.”

Ginny turned her attention to Anthony Goldstein. "Truth or Dare Goldstein."

He shifted in his seat under Ginny's stare. "Dare."

"I dare you to floo to the last woman you slept with and apologize."

"Apologize for what?" Goldstein laughed.

"For having to sleep with you." Ginny stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. The audience burst out in laughter.

"I didn't hear you complaining when you slept with me." Goldstein snapped and the crowd had a collective gasp.

"Oh that's exactly why I'm daring you. I know what it's like and you owe her an apology."

"Oh shit." Someone said loudly.

"I uh...well..." Anthony stumbled over his words. "Pass." He finally gritted out. The crowd clapped for Ginny.

Ron was staring at Hermione with a slightly crazed expression. "Truth or dare, Mione."

She lifted her chin. "Truth." Draco's fingertips still gently trailed along her thigh.

"When do you think he'll start calling you a mudblood?" He asked casually. "Or does he already do it?" Draco stilled underneath her. "You know that he owns you once you sign that contract." Ron's jaw tightened.

"I'm not sure what you're asking Ronald." Hermione glared back at him.

"How soon do you think he'll remember how much he hates you, Hermione?" Draco began to move, but Hermione shook her head. Draco's eyes were filled with cold fury, but he stayed in his seat.

"Pass." Hermione said. The room was tense as the game shifted to Ginny. She looked between Ron and Hermione.

"Ron truth or dare?"

"Dare." He finally pulled his gaze away from Hermione and looked at Ginny.

"Do you remember when you blamed me for breaking that vase from great aunt Tessie?"

He relaxed, adjusting his shoulders. "Yeah."

"I dare you to send a howler to our mother confessing your lie."

Ron considered the dare for several moments before saying, "Fuck it." He summoned a howler and sent it.

“Damn it.” Ginny shook her head. “I really thought that would stump you.”

Ron ignored her and grinned at Draco, the alcohol glazed his eyes over making them look wild.

“Truth or dare Malfoy?”

“Dare.”

“I dare you to give me your address.”

“I pass.”

Ron smiled arrogantly. “I’ll split the pot with ya, Gin. Otherwise, I’ll start daring you to confess your own sins to mom.”

“Alright. Deal.” Ginny said with a huff.

Ron stomped as he stood out of his chair, lifting both arms in the air, cheering loudly. “Fuck yeah.” He pulled Daphne over and kissed her cheek. “Good job, dear.” She patted his face.

“Get me another drink, Daph.” He said fully gloating. “We need to celebrate.”

The room began to relax as the participants left their seats. Hermione wanted to leave the whole party immediately, partially to be alone with Draco, but a larger part of her needed to be away from Ron and his constant look of betrayal. Her and Draco held hands while a group crowded around them, congratulating them on their courtship and vying for more details. Ron’s eyes kept flicking to Hermione across the room and it was the cold sadness in his eyes that made Hermione the most uncomfortable. She didn’t want to feel guilty for dating Malfoy, but he was doing everything possible to make sure she did. And worse she could feel it working. She could feel all the memories coming up to the surface. She forced herself to compartmentalize, shoving those thoughts away into that chamber of her mind.

“Draco.” Blaise cut through the small crowd that had gathered around them. “I need to speak with you privately.” Malfoy squeezed her hand before leaving.

Hermione quickly darted out of the crowd making her way towards Theo when McLaggen stepped in front of her blocking her path.

“Granger.” He winked.

“You’re an idiot. Stop winking at me.” She hissed.

He rolled his eyes. “See you later.” He winked again before stepping away.

Hermione marched up to Theo. “Who are you dating?” She demanded.

He pursed his lips. “I found out you were courting Draco Malfoy from Neville Longbottom. Perhaps you’ll find out who I’m dating from him as well.” Theo tossed his nose in the air and walked away.

“He’ll get over it.” Harry said beside her then added. “Are you really courting Malfoy?”

“Yes she is.” Draco said as he slid his hand in hers. “And I need her for a moment, excuse us.”

Draco didn’t wait for Harry’s reply as he pulled her out of the sitting room

“What are you doing?” Hermione asked as he dragged her down the hallway abruptly turning into a room and locking the door.

“I have to leave.” He said.

“Oh.” Hermione’s stomach sank with heavy disappointment. “Where are you going?”

“A third runic stone is available, but there is a bidding war. I have it on a very temporary hold, but it’s in the U.S.”

Draco’s expression was hard for Hermione to read. His face was blank, he was hiding his emotions again, yet his eyes were searching for answers to questions he hadn’t asked her. Draco stared at her with such intensity she shifted on her feet.

“And when do you leave?” She swallowed, her voice hoarse, tightening the grip she had on his hand.

“In twenty minutes.” He whispered.

They stared at each other for too long and it was getting harder to breathe. *Twenty minutes...*

Twenty minutes was not enough time. She was supposed to be bringing him home, not saying goodbye. This was ridiculously unfair.

“You said.” Hermione’s eyes darted to his lips and back to his eyes. Eyes that were already on her mouth. Eyes that looked *hungry*. “We were taking things slow.”

“I did.” He said, finally meeting her gaze.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Do you still want to kiss me?”

Hermione nodded and his lips finally crashed into hers.

## Chapter 17

It was a hard press of their lips and Draco stayed uncharacteristically still. Hermione wondered why, but if he wanted to go slow she shouldn't question it. They'd done things backwards from the beginning. He pulled away reluctantly.

"I missed kissing you." He breathed.

"Then why'd you stop?" Hermione said, she was starving too and a hypocrite. She pulled him back towards her and he moaned against her mouth. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Wait. Stop." She said frustrated.

"Okay." He panted, stepping away from her.

"No sorry, I just want to touch you." She said as she tried to pull her gloves off. Draco helped her and in those moments he pulled them off, Hermione became frenzied with need. *Only 20 minutes. She felt robbed.*

Finally her bare hands touched him, roaming his chest. He caught her by the waist, as his lips found hers again, he pushed them backwards towards the door. Pressing their bodies flush. He was hard against her and the throbbing between her legs amplified ten times over, she rolled against his length.

His hands remained firmly planted on her hips. And she wondered if she was pushing him too far. He wanted slow, but she didn't know if she could do slow.

"Is this alright?" She panted. "Is this too fast?"

He didn't stop pressing kisses against her mouth as he spoke.

"Granger if you only knew how much I've thought about touching you again like this." He rasped.

"Then touch me." Hermione pleaded. "Or we can slow down. I mean either way is fine. And we only have twenty minutes but—" His hands pressed upwards and over her breasts, over her chest, up her neck and cupped her face. Everywhere he touched burned with need, stoking the fire between her legs.

"Where do you want me to touch you?" He purred in her ear. He was going too slow. *Twenty minutes. Twenty fucking minutes.*

"Everywhere you want to touch me." She rolled her hips against him again, the fabric of her dress not allowing her to get very much friction. He kissed her again, this time his tongue swiped against her lips. She opened immediately, whimpering at the sensation that sparked down her spine as their tongues collided. She continued to rock against him as one of his

hands slid up her bare leg. She was so grateful for that thigh high slit in her dress. He cupped her bare bum, squeezing hard. She pressed onto her toes tightening her arms around his neck. She wanted to be closer, she wanted more of everything. But what were they again? What was courting? What did it mean to him? She needed to know. His mouth peppered kisses on her jaw and up to her ear. He nipped at her ear lobe. “You’re courting me.” She stated.

His hand moved up and down the inside of her thigh. “Yes.” He said grazing his teeth down her neck. “What-what- does that mean?” She panted.

“Whatever you want it to mean.” He kissed her chest, the tops of her breasts. “Can I take this off of you?” He looked up at her.

“Why are you holding back?” Hermione breathed. “You were telling me that you wanted your head between my legs and now you’re asking for permission for everything.” She leaned her head against the door, her hands falling to his chest. “Is that what slow means?”

“I’m trying to control myself.” His swollen lips and breathing made her want to lock the door and only let him out until they were both thoroughly satisfied. That might take days though.

His hands moved back to her waist. “Im so sorry. I couldn’t control myself out there. I should have asked you first before announcing we were anything more than friends and I lost control. I’m sorry. Im so sorry.”

“What does it mean? Courting?” Hermione didn’t want to talk at all right now, but they needed to if he was leaving for North America and a large portion of the wizarding world was about to spread their news overnight.

“It can mean a lot of things.” Draco said as he brushed a hand over her hair, tucking it behind her ear. “It’s … it doesn’t have to be anything serious. I just….” he trailed off and cupped her face. “I’m sorry. Don’t freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out.” Hermione whispered. Mostly. She was mostly not freaking out. “I need facts though. I need answers.”

He swallowed. “I like being your friend Hermione, but I don’t want to be *just* your friend.”

“Okay.” She gave him a shy smile. “More than friends.” She pulled him closer, wrapping her arms around his neck again.

“And during a courtship you get to know each other to see how compatible you are.”

“Right.” Hermione said over his lips. “That’s enough facts for now. Don’t hold back, please.”

His tongue met hers and his arms wrapped around her waist and he lifted her up, placing her on a desk. He yanked her dress down her breasts falling free. He didn’t stop kissing her as he touched her. His thumb circling her nipple softly before pinching hard. Hermione ran her hands over his abdomen feeling the muscle tighten as she did. She gripped his waist bringing him closer. His kisses became more desperate, more forceful and she relished in every swipe

of his tongue and movement of his mouth. She matched his energy and it only seemed to push him farther. One hand moved along her inner thigh in hurried sweeping strokes. His thumb briefly slid against her dampened lace knickers. He was still hesitant and Hermione pressed into his hand giving permission. She moaned into his mouth as he pushed her panties aside and swept a thumb over her swollen clit.

She was throbbing violently down there.

Wet and wanting.

He circled around her clit teasingly. His other hand kneaded her breast hard, digging into her skin.

He sucked on her tongue and as he pressed firmly against her clit, she let out a muffled scream.

“Fuck.” He grunted. “I didn’t know if I’d ever touch you this way again. You’re such a dream. You’re so perfect.” He said against her mouth, he licked her lips before moving down her neck, biting her gently. His thumb swirled around her clit faster. She gripped his hair, pressing him into her neck. “Harder.” She groaned.

“Not here.” He breathed. “Everyone will see.”

She ignored the hurt that rose inside of her.

He was kissing her and courting her. Surely He didn’t want to hide her. It didn’t stop it entirely but she was able to push it to the back of her mind. She spread her legs farther apart forcing her dress to open for her, the seem stretched that and then ripped.

His lips dragged down her neck leaving a wet trail as he kissed and sucked her skin. He licked her collar bone and kissed her shoulders and then without warning bit firmly into her breast as he slid his fingers into her core.

“Oh fuck.” She moaned. His fingers were inside her. She didn’t know how long she’d been anticipating this moment until it was here. She was so close already and she wanted his cock inside her. She started pulling at his belt buckle.

“Not enough time.” He groaned. She ignored him and continued to pull open his belt, pressing her hands inside his trousers. He hissed as her hand wrapped around his cock.

“Hermione.” He whimpered against her mouth. “You’re so perfect. You’re so pretty. You’re such a good girl, so good.” He groaned deeply against her neck as she picked up her speed.

He pressed his fingers deeper, curling them and pressing upward hitting the spot that had her gasping for air.

She could feel his cock harden, swelling to a point that could be painful. She tightened her grip swirling her thumb over his head and down the vein under his shaft. He bit down on her lip. It only made her more frenzied. She had never felt like this with any one. She’d never felt this out of control. She’d slept with enough people to know this isn’t how she normally felt.

She liked sex and enjoyed it immensely but this was so different. She didn't understand why. She was so overwhelmed with need and want. It was all encompassing.

"I'm...I'm going to come." He said and his low hoarse voice made her walls flutter in anticipation.

"Come on me." She panted. She licked his tongue and he licked her back. Their tongues pressed against one another sliding up and down while she slid her hand up and down his cock in unison.

His warm seed shot out on her hand and against her bare thighs. She moaned loudly and he continued to work her clit so perfectly she didn't understand how he knew what to do so well. She bucked as he pressed more firmly and slowly against her, once. Twice. A third swipe and she was crying out, but he captured her mouth with his as she rocked against his hand. He turned slightly so she could ride his palm and she kept slowly stroking him through her orgasm. Her body felt like a wildfire burning through every part of her body, in the best way possible.

They both slowed their hands until they were simply breathing against each other. He looked at her through hooded eyes, as he pulled his fingers out of her and placed them in his mouth. Licking them clean.

He sucked her arousal off his fingers and she couldn't take it. It was too much. He was too attractive. She pulled him back to her mouth. Tasting herself on his lips. She didn't care. She wanted him inside her now. Her kisses were much slower but not any less desperate. The things she was tempted to say to him. To admit to him. Her mouth needed to be doing something else or otherwise it would be a disaster. She wrapped her legs around the back of his thighs and she felt his still hard cock against her thigh. His trousers still mostly on. His hands swiped the cum from her thigh and began massaging it gently across her nipples... Oh fuck. She was going to come again. He moved his hand moved across her breast smearing himself across her chest. Oh gods it was the most erotic feeling she'd ever experienced. Something that felt intimate and carnal. A claiming of sorts.

But her feelings were irrelevant. They were taking things slow...

His cock began grinding against her core and she pushed her hips closer to him.

The loud sound of a cell phone vibrating against the desk broke the silence.

He paused resting his head against hers, fumbling for his phone. He cleared his throat.

"Yes." He answered. "I'm leaving soon."

"I know."

"Shut up." He hissed ending the call.

"I'm sorry." He said softly, looking at her.

"As if you have anything to be sorry about." She smiled. She was so pleasantly warm. The aftermath of the pleasure wound through body like a warm blanket, comforting and cozy. She wanted to curl up and sleep in his arms.

"Courting means exclusivity." He said rather abruptly. He seemed shocked at his own tone. "I mean . I don't own you like Weasley suggested, but I don't share... unless that's unacceptable for your needs. I just—" she kissed him softly. She loved kissing him. She wanted to snog all night long.

She'd never seen him so tongue tied. "You said that. when we were dancing." Her cheeks heated remembering his words.

*"I simply wanted everyone that saw you tonight to know who you belonged to."* She wouldn't repeat the actual words he used, they felt very different than exclusivity.

"Right." He said. He pulled away slightly and adjusted his trousers. "And you're okay with that?"

"Yes." Hermione wasn't sure what else to say. He was looking at her so carefully like she might claw his eyes out of jump out of window.

"I have to go." He whispered. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Okay." She said adjusting her body. She grabbed her wand and used a cleaning charm and a mending charm on her dress. Then did the same for Draco.

They were standing by the door now. Holding each others stare. Saying goodbye after such an intense moment was strange. Should they hug? Kiss again? There was a knock at the door.

"Draco." Harry said. "We need to leave now."

He opened the door roughly. "I'm aware." They walked into the hallway and met half a dozen stares. Even if they didn't look like they had been shagging, she was aware everyone assumed that's exactly what happened by the looks on everyone's faces. Hermione avoided eye contact with anyone as they walked down the hallway toward the floo.

A few people lingered nearby. They all wanted to see how Draco acted around Hermione now that they were courting. She laced her fingers with his, gripping his arm. She didn't want to be done touching him. When they reached the fireplace Harry went first with a warning glare at Draco. "If you're not following me in 2 minutes I swear to Merlin..."

"Go Harry. Unless you want watch me kiss him." Hermione said.

Harry rolled his eyes and threw in the floo powder.

Draco turned to her. "I'm still starving."

"Me too." She said with a smile.

He released her hand and cupped her cheek. She leaned into the touch as he swept his thumb over her cheekbone.

"You have to leave." She whispered and he sighed in response. They gently pressed their lips together. It was a sweet, tender kiss. She pulled back slowly. "Thank you for getting the third stone."

He walked towards the floo. "Anything for you." He said as he disappeared into the flames.

Hermione turned around and more than a few people had gathered to watch their departure and she wasn't sure how she felt about everyone witnessing the intimate moment. It was Ron's glare that caught her off guard. He wasn't making any attempt to hide his feelings. She held her head high as she walked past them all. She didn't give one flying fuck about what they thought. And she needed to lecture McLaggen immediately.

## Chapter 18

Two days had passed since Draco's departure at the Halloween party leaving Hermione riddled with anxiety.

Hermione and Draco were all over the news and Narcissa had written to tell her they wouldn't release a formal announcement until she spoke with her in person, which had her stomach tumbling as she dressed for their morning tea.

The speculations didn't stop without a formal statement however. Any and every picture of Hermione and Draco together had been splashed across the papers. Grainy photos of them out in public, every single photo of them at her book signing, and they even managed to find a class picture of the two of them. Hermione was a 14 year old with wild hair and a wide smile and Draco... Draco had been glancing at Hermione. Glaring really. He had always glared at her anytime he looked at her. The papers had a field day with their headlines.

IS GRYFFINDOR'S PRINCESS OFF THE MARKET? GET THE INSIDE SCOOP OF THE SCANDALOUS AFFAIR WITH DEATH EATER DRACO MALFOY.

COULD THE SLYTHERIN PRINCE BE COURTING MUGGLEBORN HERMIONE GRANGER OR ARE THE WILD RUMORS NOTHING MORE THAN A PUBLICITY STUNT?

MALFOY HEIR TO MARRY AUTHOR HERMIONE GRANGER. OUR ADVICE TO MALFOY? SIGN A GOOD PRENUP!

DOES THE GOLDEN TRIO HAVE ROOM FOR ONE MORE? HOW MANY BOYS CAN HERMIONE GRANGER SINK HER CLAWS INTO? JOIN US AS WE MAP OUT GRANGER'S EXTENSIVE DATING HISTORY AND AFFAIRS.

RUSHED COURTSHIP BETWEEN FELON DRACO MALFOY AND GOLDEN GIRL HERMIONE GRANGER. PREGNANCY RUMORS AND MORE ABOUND.

WAR HEROINE AND DEATH EATER IN LOVE! RUMORS SUGGEST THE TWO WILL WED BEFORE THE END OF YEAR!

FROM SCHOOLYARD ENEMIES TO ADULT LOVERS: DOES LOVE CONQUER ALL OR IS SOMETHING NEFARIOUS AFOOT.

HERMIONE GRANGER CAUGHT IN THE ACT AT NOTT MANOR SHAGGING DEATH EATER DRACO MALFOY

Logically she knew it would be a big deal to court or date Malfoy publicly but it wasn't until the headlines came out that she realized how absurdly dramatic it would be. Hermione clipped out each picture of her and Draco, but the headlines were bothering her more than she liked to admit. It was bringing up a lot of questions that she needed to address with Draco.

They hadn't discussed the past really and it seemed like both of them wanted to avoid it. She surely did, but it wasn't smart.

Hermione was equally filled with a bubbling dread and a strange excitement to speak with Narcissa. She would know how to handle the next steps.

The Malfoy Matriarch had truly become a friend to her, a comfort and confidant, Hermione was used to telling her about her life. Narcissa was always willing to listen with the understanding that she was allowed to share her true opinion on whatever Hermione shared. Narcissa was never cruel, but she was direct and sometimes said things Hermione didn't want to accept.

If this had been any other man she would have already discussed it with her. But it wasn't... it was her *son*... and Hermione would certainly blame everything on him, but she couldn't help but feel guilty. And awkward. In her defense she hadn't expected to be courting him suddenly. Which is why she desperately wanted Narcissa to explain what courting meant in their world and give Hermione a sense of direction within their relationship.

That is if Narcissa was happy and accepting. And if Hermione was being honest, which frustratingly she was doing more of against her will now that that stupid chamber was coming undone, there was a not-so-small part of her that worried Narcissa wouldn't accept her.

It was one thing to be friends with her and entirely different thing to be dating her only child. Especially as a muggleborn. His whole life Draco heard he would date and marry a pureblood witch. Hermione understood she was beneath him in social standing, wealth, and many other areas by pureblood standards, outside of her blood status. She considered herself a decent catch, but she wasn't anything special. She wasn't high society. She certainly wasn't pure blood material. The little she had the courage to read about pureblood relationships over the last two days simply talked about finding the right kind of match. The type of person who you courted used veiled language of what a pureblood woman was. Pure in blood, high in social standing, and/or had a lot of money. That had to impact the Malfoy family still. It certainly still impacted Lucius to an extent. She didn't even want to think about what he would say once he found out.

Pilly was waiting for her when she arrived at the manor. She squealed and wrapped her tiny arms around Hermione's legs. "Miss." Pilly gave a shy smile. "Mistress is waiting for you."

Hermione's stomach flipped incessantly on the walk over. It was akin to a walk of shame in some way. Actually very similar to how she felt stumbling into her home to find Theo sniffing out her affair immediately. *Oh gods.* A bowling ball size weight dropped into her stomach and she felt that familiar internal tug to run away. To just avoid all the awkwardness and duck out immediately. She could apparate away, perhaps to Australia, or the other side of England or somewhere far, far away where she wouldn't have to contemplate who hated her and how much they hated her and maybe if she ran away the stalker issue would disappear as well. She stood outside the door and took a few deep breaths. Logically she understood her flight response was also a trauma response, but it felt so visceral, so literally dangerous. She breathed in again, willing herself to move forward through the doors.

Narcissa was in the sitting room, tea already waiting for Hermione.

Narcissa smiled at her and it eased some of the tension in her shoulders. And then Narcissa pulled her into a hug before she could say anything. Hermione didn't realize how much she needed a hug like that, she clutched onto the woman for several minutes

When they finally sat, Narcissa arched a brow. "Start from the beginning."

Hermione let out a breathy laugh which was more of an exhale of relief that Narcissa hadn't hexed her on the spot. Hermione recounted the Halloween party. Most of it anyway.

Highlighting the parts where Susan Bones lost her job and Pansy and Ginny might be dating. And finally she shared how Draco called her his date but she wasn't certain what that meant since they had a planned PR date and then when he announced he was courting her she got swept up in the moment and agreed to court him without much explanation.

"I don't really know why he said it. Or what courting means." Hermione said. "I was hoping you could help me with that part and perhaps give me some book recommendations on the topic."

Narcissa sighed softly. "I love my son. And no doubt I'm the reason for some of his more extreme personality traits, but along with being spoiled he is quite obsessive and rather possessive to a fault. Malfoy men tend to be that way." Hermione furrowed her brow and Narcissa sipped her tea. "Which is why Draco's impulsiveness is more understandable in this situation, even though it was quite disrespectful." The witch wrinkled her nose. "Please understand dear that I'm seriously offended on your behalf."

"You are?" Hermione's brows rose. "I mean I planned to blame him anyway, but I'm glad I don't have to work for it."

Narcissa smirked as she set down her teacup, crossing her legs at the ankle. "For him to state he's courting you so brashly...he obviously cares for you and got carried away, but doing so without your consent is very bad practice and quite offensive, if anyone were to have find that out, it would be a disaster. But because you don't have the same cultural implications of courting it's not going to hit you the same way. So that's why I'm offended twice over." Narcissa huffed. Hermione had never seen the witch so expressive.

"So what does courting mean. Why is it different from just dating?" Hermione asked looking into her teacup. For once in her life she considered looking at tea leaves to give her some guidance.

"A courtship would mean something different to each family. Some use it to make alliances between families for more power or wealth, but ultimately it means whatever you want it to mean, the connotation, despite Draco's abrasive announcement, it's him stating he has interest in you and when you agree to court someone it's also saying you're agreeing to turn away other suitors."

Hermione sipped her tea. "Speaking to others about it feels different though. Like... like I've been branded or like we are getting married next week." Hermione's cheeks flushed. She'd received quite a few inquires about their wedding and it had her head spinning.

"In earlier pureblood traditions a courtship was used to create a business relationships or form some advantage in a social connection. It was usually formed by their parents and rarely for love and almost immediately led to marriage. Some families still consider courtship to simply be a stepping stone to marriage for business purposes. More modern interpretations use courtships for a time to get to know the other party in a more formal way."

"Was yours a love match?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I was lucky in that I was very attracted to Lucius upon meeting him, but no, we hadn't fallen in love in a traditional way. It wasn't until our third meeting where we were allowed to be alone with each other that we had an actual conversation about life. He told me many years later that he knew I was to be his wife the moment he met me, but I don't know if I would have said the same thing. I liked him and he was very handsome. I did fall in love rapidly after we were married though."

"And that's rare?"

"Nowadays it's much less rare but during my youth it was extremely rare. Pureblood families marry for strategic reasons. Any advantage to help their family survive or thrive. So love wasn't a factor in most of those marriages, but in modern times it's a factor now, just not the only one. Courtships with contracts were a way to see if the alliance would work long term. Some have short courtships without any choices due to their parents dictating the contracts and others have longer less serious courtships, but one only enters into a courtship without consideration of the future to some extent."

Hermione considered this. She didn't know what she offered to Draco; she had no social connections for him and clearly being with her was dangerous. "So for Draco..."

"I will be the first to say I want him to marry for love." Narcissa looked understanding. "I would never wish him to marry solely because of a business advantage. Him initiating the courtship means you hold all the power, dear."

Hermione snorted. "I have no power."

"There are different types of courtships, Hermione. Those that are created by parental control and those initiated by the couple themselves. Whoever initiates the courtship is the one essentially saying, 'you determine the stipulations of the contract.' because they are going after what they want. You get to decide what you'd like out of the relationship and he will most likely try to accommodate those requests." She sighed again. "His behavior at the Halloween party was very uncouth and I've lectured him at length. I'll be sending him another howler after our conversation just to remind him of his manners. You might be okay with it, but him announcing it without your consent was very bad. You could sue him if you'd like. I wouldn't stop you." She shrugged.

Hermione chuckled, "I don't want to sue him. I think... I think I'm confused mostly."

"About how you feel about him or the ins and outs of courtship?" Narcissa's eyes narrowed curiously.

Hermione looked down at her tea cup again. "Both maybe." She swallowed and her throat tightened. She didn't need to cry about this. She liked Draco more than she would admit to anyone, but it still hurt whenever she thought about his words to her. "When Draco was in Azkaban he wrote and thanked me for my testimony. I wrote him back and it took a while for a return letter but when he did reply, he wasn't very kind. And it really, really hurt to read the words he wrote. It was around the same time I was looking for my parents and I was so lonely when I received the letter it was..." she breathed heavily through her nose. "It was very difficult to get past. And to be honest I'm not sure if I am over it. It's confusing because I really do like him and I think I would like to get to know him more, but..." she trailed off.

Narcissa offered her a soft smile, "Hermione I've grown to care for you greatly over the years. I don't know if I've ever told you this, but when you first started volunteering for my charity, I was nervous to be around you. I didn't think you'd like me very much and I was just barely recovering from being without my family. Being alone in this house was awfully hard. But you were kind to me the moment you spoke to me. I could tell you were apprehensive, but you were brave too."

Hermione swallowed painfully, her breathing sharp. Narcissa was a friend she didn't know she needed either. A motherly figure to step in when her own mother had hurt her so badly.

"I didn't have many friends who were genuine, perhaps I never have, but most of them either gossiped about me or wanted to use me during that vulnerable time and Draco was hardly ever around, Lucius as you know didn't accept visitors for a long time either, but there you were happily working alongside me. Boxing gifts and organizing invitations. I needed a friend and I found an unexpected one in an 18 year old woman. You were a blessing to me at that time and you still are. I would love nothing more than to see you legally be my daughter, but I see you as one now and I'll see you as my family no matter how you feel about my son. I swear it."

The witch leaned over and patted Hermione's leg, before releasing a slow breathe.

"But you should know that Draco doesn't do things halfway. It is all or nothing for him. I know he tries to act passive and casual, but unfortunately he's not wired that way. If you're confused you should talk to him about that letter. Talk to him about your concerns and ask him how he feels. I won't speak for him because it's not my place. But just know that once you say you're his, he'll have a hard time going backwards. I don't want either of you to get hurt. As much as Draco pretends he's above feelings, I can assure you he is very emotional. A courtship doesn't have to be quite serious in the beginning, so you can take away the marriage pressure, but you should consider what you'd like out of it and get to know who he is now."

Narcissa's words lingered in the back of Hermione's mind as she wandered through Diagon Alley. There were the usual whispers, but apparently being rumored to be courting Draco Malfoy was bringing out a sense of safety she didn't know existed. There seemed to be a wide berth of space everyone gave her as she moved through the streets. No one came too close, no one snapped any photos, and no one spoke to her. It was the best shopping trip she could have asked for.

While she browsed books at Flourish and Blotts, she gathered the facts she knew. Firstly, she was quite indecently attracted to Draco Malfoy. Which was still strange to her... Did she really fancy the boy who called her all those bad names? The boy that made fun of her hair and teeth? The same prat who tried to get animals killed, attempted to kill Albus Dumbledore, and allowed death eaters into Hogwarts... Reluctantly she still said yes to her own question.

She really fancied him.

He was an attractive idiot even at school, even when he looked malnourished and skittish. He lived with the Dark Lord and Hermione couldn't imagine being around that much dark magic constantly. The heaviness it would bring to your soul, the sadness that surely encompassed you. Her own encounters with dark magic still left her with nightmares, but not when Draco was around...

She liked being close to him, she liked touching him, she liked his hair and even his irritating smirk, and she liked the way his lips felt against hers, like they were made for her.

She liked his laugh and sense of humor and his smile and how he touched her and his eyes... Those piercing grey eyes were filled with... *he glared at her*... like in the hallways of Hogwarts... like in that class photo... surely it was a different stare. A confusing mixture of feelings cascaded through her, every time he caught her eye at Hogwarts that glare made her shiver and assumed it was in loathing, but if he stared at her like that now, the same intense gaze when he gave her those filthy kisses and got her off in a study at Nott manor. She shook her head. Gods...

Then there was the fact that he had been keeping tabs on her for much longer than she realized. At least since May, but most likely longer. Hermione brushed her fingers alongside the bookshelf of pureblood courtships and pulled one down flipping absentmindedly through it.

There was an *inappropriate* amount of exhilaration she had at the thought of him watching her. He knew her schedule much too quickly when he was hired on. She's a busy witch and no one could have memorized it that fast. Even Blaise still got confused. A fact she would soon take advantage of. Draco knew details about her she'd never shared with him personally and apparently he'd bought that bloody restaurant after she walked in.

Which seemed abnormal to an extent. Narcissa did say he was obsessive. She should be more offended. Or scared. Or something... That would be the healthy thing to do. And yet... she knew her own infatuation was not exactly normal. She had worked so hard to keep it that way. She'd done a damned good job too, but Merlin knows she had been far from appropriate. Even now with him gone, that familiar hum of his name returned with full force.

*Draco. Draco. Draco. Draco. Draco.*

It played on a loop in the background of her mind. She had worked so hard to keep it quiet. And for years her mind healer worked with Hermione to get her to a place where she felt normal.

So why didn't she scream with horror when he admitted the restaurant thing? Because to her own squirm inducing embarrassment...she was *flattered*. It felt *so so so so so* incredibly *stupid* to admit, so very stupid, but she couldn't help it. It was probably the grandest gesture she'd ever received. It flattered her to no end, created a buzzing sensation in her body, like a butterflies taking flight. Even if it was sort of creepy, she could admit it was quite an odd thing to do, it still made her blush incessantly and wish to song him endlessly.

Hermione realized with abrupt devastation she was not confused at all, rather she was completely and utterly terrified. The cold, overwhelming terror was right there alongside her affection for the sexy, creep. Because to dive deeper into that chamber...To admit how she felt out loud made her physically ill. A sharp twist of anxiety surged through her body, twisting in her gut. She was so scared of being abandoned. Of putting in so much work and effort all to led on, to be let down and for all for it to be a trick.

She shoved the courtship book back on the shelf. She didn't want to know what purebloods did anymore. If she held the power she would make up her own rules. Dating Ron had reinforced every insecurity she had and the way her mother treated her left a wound Hermione didn't know would ever heal entirely.

Hermione was an overwhelmed, batty witch. How on earth could-

The hairs on the back of her neck rose as a tingling sensation wound slowly down her spine. She paused. She was being followed...

She had sensed it briefly the moment she took a sharp turn into the book store, but thought it was Blaise. Now she knew for certain someone was watching her and it wasn't him. She turned abruptly. A flash of blonde hair caught the corner of her eye.

*Draco wasn't here.*

He texted her last night saying he arrived safely in America. He planned to call her sometime today. She fished out her phone as quickly as possible. She took another abrupt turn, almost knocking into an older wizard.

"Granger." Blaise answered on the first ring.

"You still following me?" Hermione whispered.

"Just two stores down. Damn I really thought I had you this time. How'd'"

"I have company in Flourish and Blotts."

"I'm coming."

Hermione's heart beat wildly in her chest as she moved deeper into the maze of book shelves. She wanted to trap the bastard, tie him down, and beat him senseless. She turned left, then left again, then right, and then spun around quickly wand out and ready.

Justin Finch-Fletchly's camera flashed, the bright bulb straight in front of her face. Hermione stumbled blindly knocking her shoulder into a bookshelf painfully. "Fuck." She snapped as

several large history books fell upon her head making her stumble backwards hitting her head sharply on the edge of a shelf. More books fell off and rained down upon her as she fell completely on her ass with a loud yelp.

Blaise said angrily. "What the fuck are you doing Fletchley?"

"Just wanted to grab a photo!" Justin's voice trailed away quickly.

"Are you alright?" Blaise kneeled down on the ground and pulled off the books on Hermione's lap. Her head spun with a nauseating, throbbing pain.

"No, I'm not." She grumbled as he slowly lifted her up. The back of her head stung as she rubbed her fingertips against a small cut. The sharp edges of the bookshelf had gotten her good. "Gods that hurt." She hissed, her finger tips coated with a thin layer of blood.

"Oh shit." Blaise grabbed her hand. "Look at me, you probably have a concussion." He held her chin as she forced her eyes to focus, he lifted his wand and cast a small *lumos*. He tracked her eyes with the light. "Yeah, definitely a concussion." He said as he let his wand fall to his side. "We should get to a healer and--"

Another bright flash went off and Hermione hissed at the sensation. It sent her moving backwards again, but this time Blaise gripped her shoulders to keep her steady. It went off again and Blaise let out a loud yell. "You bloody idiot." He let Hermione go after propping her up against a shelf and chased after him with his wand out.

Blaise never caught up to Justin and he came back in a fowl mood because of it. Only once they were back to her apartment and after a healer had come did he seem to settle down. Her lump on the back of her head was much smaller and the cut healed. Hermione only let the healer do what was absolutely necessary. She didn't want excessive magic near her brain. The concussion symptoms would remain because there was nothing much to do. She could only treat the individual symptoms, which currently was a horrific ringing headache. Blaise wrapped a cooling spell around her forehead.

There had been an enormous bouquet of flowers on her table when she arrived home. Along with a note from Draco.

*Slytherin Prince Courts Gryffindor Princess: From Halloween Party Tryst to an Official Date Next Week at Harmony and Hearth. Will She Show? The Malfoy Heir Waits Eagerly to Hear the Golden Goddess' Reply.*

Blaise gagged after reading it to her. She giggled ridiculously and laid down on the couch with a smile on her face texting her reply to Draco.

*Famous Romance Author Accepts Date with Number One Fan.*

Blaise sat on the other side of the couch. "Malfoy is going to kill me."

Hermione huffed. "Is that what's got you all worked up?" She set her phone on the table and closed her eyes, resting an arm over her eyes.

"Why on earth were you running farther into the store instead of out of it? I would have been there sooner if you hadn't been running away from the exit."

"I was trying to trap him." Hermione replied, bristling. "I'm not a porcelain doll, Blaise. I don't need to be rescued, I called you for backup not to be the hero."

"I just didn't expect that to be your plan. I thought you would be running towards the exit." He sighed. "Which was an oversight on my part."

"You don't know me very well it's understandable. Assume I will run into the problem with a solution in mind, even if it's a little blurry." Hermione replied.

"You were really going to trap him?" Blaise snorted.

"Yes I have a tendency to trap people if they piss me off." Hermione opened an eye. "You better watch out."

"Good to know." Blaise chuckled and adjusted on the couch. "Well might as well get this over with." He pulled out his phone and called Malfoy on speaker.

"Blaise." The low timbre of Draco's voice made Hermione shiver.

Hermione smiled to herself. "There wasn't that much blood. Don't kill Blaise." Hermione said before Zabini could respond.

His eyes went wide and mouth dropped open before standing quickly. "You sneaky witch!"

"Blaise." Malfoy's voice growled through the phone. Hermione cackled loudly then said. "The healer will be back in two days so hopefully there's no brain damage."

Blaise scoffed. "Oy! Stop! You are underestimating Malfoy, he will really kill me!" He ran, literally ran to her bathroom and locked the door. Hermione laughed to herself as she closed her eyes again. She liked ruffling everyone's feathers.

She woke when her own cell phone buzzed on the coffee table for the third time. She reached blindly and answered with a raspy, "Hello." She licked her lips and yawned.

Draco greeted her with. "If it weren't for security cameras, I would have sent everyone to your flat already."

"I'm glad you didn't, I would have been very upset at you for such a dramatic overreaction." She still hadn't even opened her eyes. The day had been emotional and exhausting.

"I've called you seven times."

Oops Hermione had not heard those ones. "In the real world, Mr. Malfoy heir, not everything happens when you decide it does. And you can't buy me, so you'll just have to talk to me when I decide to answer the phone."

His warm chuckle skipped across her skin and she immediately smiled. There was a sort of weird swirling of warmth in her chest.

She was quiet for a moment feeling the sensation, being her lip.

"How are you feeling Princess?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't call me that."

"Okay fine, sweetheart."

"Oh Merlin." She couldn't help but grin again much to her own embarrassment. "Two days away from me and you've turned mushy."

"Is it so wrong of me to miss you?"

"I suppose not." She said, turning to lay on her side, "But I guess that depends on how *much* you missed me."

"Oh a very normal amount, I assure you." He replied.

Another beat of silence held between them. They needed to talk about so many things, but her head ached and his voice was comforting and she really missed him.

"I spoke with your mother today." Hermione finally said.

"I've received a dozen howlers in two days." He replied. "I hope you know how sorry I am. And I'm not apologizing because of my mother. I'm genuinely sorry and I don't want you to feel pressured to do anything you're uncomfortable with. And I want to really ask you properly, to court me that is, but I'd rather do it in person."

"I appreciate that." She really did. Hermione was silent for a few moments. She wanted and needed more communication from him before she could trust her own feelings or his, but she also knew that taking pressure off herself to figure everything out immediately was a good idea. "I think we have a good plan though."

"And what is our plan dearest?" Draco purred. Hermione stifled her laugh. She could not take those pet names seriously.

"To get to know you. To be your friend with more benefits." She smirked. "Your mother told me to start writing my wish list."

"Hmm, I will spoil you rotten." Draco hummed.

"You've already bought a restaurant, I'm not sure you could top that." She said, testing how comfortable he was talking his purchase.

He laughed. "First of all the restaurant was for my benefit alone not a gift for you. Second of all if you are trying to challenge me, I'm an incredibly competitive person. I can certainly top a restaurant."

"You better be careful, I might drain your vaults dry. I'm very creative person."

"Like I said, I up for the challenge. Would you like to tour my vaults just to see how creative you'll have to be?"

Hermione's whole body grew warm. "I'll just take a bag in and empty out all your precious jewels and that should make a dent it.

"And you'd be wrong. But I like the idea of you draped in jewels and very little else." The low timbre of his voice, so smooth and sexy had her squeezing her thighs together.

"Care for some exercise?" She breathed.

Malfoy scoffed. "If you think I'm going to approve exercise so soon after a brain injury you're sorely mistaken."

"I...I didn't mean that kind of exercise... I mean you know..." Hermione huffed. He was an ass for making her explain.

He laughed. "Oh darling, I am well aware of what kind of exercise you're referring to. I just don't want to make anything worse while your head is in pain."

"You're no fun." She clucked. "How is California? Any update on the stone?"

"Tomorrow we pick up the runic stone and we should be back in a couple of days after that."

"I am looking forward to our date." She replied sleepily. "I'm looking forward to you being back so we can talk more. I want to know who you are Draco."

"I'm an open book for you." He sounded sincere, but Hermione laughed.

"You know I like other things besides books. You don't have to be a book for me." She chuckled. "Although you'd make a very sexy, brooding book."

"I'll be whatever you want me to be."

"Just honest." She said.

"What questions do you have for me?" He said.

"Would you recite your prayer for me?"

He hesitated before speaking. "Alright." he cleared his throat and began reciting the lines in french.

"Son implication dans la guerre ne devrait pas être tenue contre lui. Sa famille a été menacée par le seigneur des ténèbres tout comme la mienne l'a été. C'est simplement un résultat malheureux qu'il soit né de ses parents plutôt que des miens. Si nous étions nés à des endroits opposés, je serais de l'autre côté de la guerre en raison de qui étaient mes parents. Ce n'est pas

quelque chose que l'on peut choisir. Devenir un enfant soldat n'était pas non plus un choix que l'un de nous a fait de sa propre volonté.

Il ne m'a pas surpris quand il est intervenu en notre faveur pendant que je subissais la torture. Ses choix, dans l'un des moments les plus terrifiants de ma vie, m'ont sauvé. Selon les témoignages publics, il a été puni pour son ingérence qui a conduit à notre évasion avec de la magie noire par sa tante. Il a été torturé, juste après moi et beaucoup plus longtemps que moi.

Et encore le lendemain, et le jour d'après, et le jour d'après. Il est exactement comme moi. Il a été traité comme moi. Menacé comme moi. Punis comme moi.

Si vous ressentez de la sympathie pour moi, alors vous devriez aussi en ressentir pour lui.

Parce qu'il est exactement comme moi.

Je crois qu'avec les outils et le soutien appropriés, il peut réparer ses crimes, se remettre du traumatisme de la guerre et être une influence positive sur la société.

Il mérite d'avoir l'opportunité de démontrer sa bonté.

Parce que je l'ai vu de mes propres yeux une nuit où je pensais que j'allais mourir.

Je l'ai vu agir pour la sécurité de sa mère.

Je l'ai vu quand il pensait que personne d'autre ne regardait.

Sa bonté a peut-être été recouverte plusieurs fois par les circonstances, mais elle est toujours là. Je peux la voir et j'espère que vous pouvez la voir aussi.

Mais si vous ne le pouvez pas, j'espère au moins que vous lui permettrez l'opportunité de vous le montrer.

Quand vous pensez à lui, je veux que vous pensiez à moi.

Parce qu'il est exactement comme moi.

Et si vous ne me puniriez pas, vous ne devriez pas le punir non plus."

"I didn't understand any of it, but it sounded lovely." Hermione thought she might have heard it somewhere which was odd because she really didn't understand any of it.

"It is lovely." He said softly.

"What does it mean? In English?"

He breathed slowly. "Essentially it's a reminder of worthiness and forgiveness and new beginnings."

"That's beautiful."

"You are beautiful."

Hermione snorted. "That was smooth."

"I mean it. You're so beautiful sometimes it's hard to look at you."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat sending her breath hitching. "It mustn't be that painful considering how much you stared at me at the Halloween party."

"I guess I'm a masochist because I can't stop."

Her tone grew a bit more serious. "I have another question."

"Promise not to run away?" Draco's voice had an edge of worry to it.

"Promise." She whispered.

"You'll get my full honesty, but just a fair warning even if you do run... I will find you." Goosebumps erupted against her skin.

"How long have you been watching me?" She asked carefully.

"A long time." He replied simply.

"That's not an answer."

"There are multiple answers I could give. One answer is a month after I was released from Azkaban. The other answer, which if I'm being honest, is." He paused. "Since the day I met you."

She waited several long moments to reply. "Will you repeat your prayer while I fall asleep?"

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Draco Malfoy hung up the phone with Hermione after repeating his prayer three more times. He was shaking slightly with nerves after reciting it. He was fairly certain she didn't know French, but still it was a risk he took, even if he had adjusted the wording a bit to avoid saying their names. Draco had no resistance to being honest with her. His desire to be honest with her was actually overwhelming. If he could blurt out all his feelings towards her all at once he would. But he knew that she'd run away if he did that and so he had to go slow. She had to lead the way.

Draco had spent years keeping a safe distance from her, years keeping tabs on her without interfering in her life. Mostly. Nothing too wild. Nothing too creepy. And everything held a large margin of plausible deniability if he were ever to be accused of anything nefarious. Then he couldn't stop thinking about her...

And then he had to approach her in that damn bar and everything went downhill from there. He could have just been happy with watching her. Draco had gone back and forth a dozen times of reasons why he bought the fucking thing, but truly it was only to see her more frequently in way that he could defend to a judge.

It's not that he regretted it, but he hated how vulnerable this part was. This limbo of not knowing how she felt. Or if she'd run away like that morning in Paris the moment he confessed everything. He regretted it that morning after she left, because finally being able to experience her and holding a bit of hope she'd feel something... only to have it be ripped away was crushing. It was a brutal reality check that she was too good for him. That being a coward was the better option.

It only took four months before his control started unraveling. He craved her like oxygen. He needed her to breathe properly. After his birthday he knew he knew he'd never be satisfied with anyone else. How could he? She was heaven. All encompassing, redeeming, and serene.

Originally his plan was to play it cool, be romantic and show her he was reliable and trustworthy he could be. Then he fucked it all up again by announcing their courtship. All the memories of them together, her begging for him to touch her came rushing back that night. He wanted everyone to know she was off limits. It was lucky she didn't really understand the significance of courtship and he was certain his mother helped play it down to some extent. Although Narcissa also threatened that she'd pay for Hermione's solicitor to sue him if she desired so he wasn't too sure.

Hermione deserved every good thing that could come her way. He would ensure she had a lifetime of it. He certainly didn't deserve her, but he was a selfish bastard and he wasn't going to let her go. She was his. There would be no other outcome. He'd be patient and spoil her and ensure she got everything she wanted in life, but he wouldn't let her go. The thought of it sent a cracking sensation in his chest.

He desperately wanted to be back near her. He was already going crazy that she had gotten hurt. The first thing he did after Blaise called him was arrange for Fletchley to be fired. Then once Draco was back in England he would find the fucker and have a word.

Potter barged through his hotel door. "I just got a call saying you just picked up the Runic stone."

"What?" Draco was on his feet. "I was on the phone with Hermione. I've only been here."

"I'm aware. We've got to get down there immediately."

Twenty minutes later Draco's pulse hammered through his body as he watched a street camera's security footage of Draco walking into the meeting place and walking out with a small box. His rage was barely contained and he wanted to bludgeon the man with a hammer, bring him to the brink of death, heal him, and then do it all over again.

He masked his anger quickly and walked through the office space casting detection spells. Looking for any clues to who this fucker was. *Nothing*. He wanted to beat his head into a

wall. He wasn't used to losing like this. He wasn't used to failing so much. He was supposed to be protecting Hermione and he couldn't even fucking do it. The idea of hiding her somewhere safe was more appealing every day. Perhaps he'd kidnap her.

"We need to go back to London immediately." Draco snapped out.

"Already started arrangements, but apparently there are some hangups with your name because you just traveled through a public international portkey." Harry breathed out a frustrated breath. "They're still posing as you. I'll be making as many calls as I can."

Draco grimaced. That was insulting, he'd never travel public portkey.

Whoever was involved in interfering in Hermione's life would pay with their own life.

He would kill them. And every single person who assisted them.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the love on this fic! It is so fun to write, all of your comments are life giving! Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I can't believe this story is almost at 20k hits. Such a cool milestone to hit.

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

The following morning Hermione Granger gathered her things for the day while she called Blaise.

“What’s the update?” She said as he answered. Hermione had woken up to Draco’s text explaining what happened in California and was fuming at the news.

Blaise replied. “It’s the same. The ministry is blocking his travel until they can figure out why Draco already traveled to England. They’re now concerned about public safety.

“They should be concerned with Draco’s safety. And you’re sure there isn’t anything I can do?”

“Not that I can think of. We sent records showing Draco’s location and your phone conversation. They’re not putting much trust into the muggle devices though. I’ll be speaking with a few people in the international travel agency today to try to get things moving.”

“Alright.” Hermione tucked her manuscript into her bag. “I’ll be working most of the day at the Manor. I have a lot to get done so please refrain from interrupting me.”

“Yes ma’am.” Blaise replied.

Once Hermione arrived at the manor she went straight to her favorite study that had a view of the gardens and relayed the same message to Pilly. “I have a lot of work to do so no interruptions please.”

“Yes Miss!” Pilly said with a silent exit. Hermione set up the desk with her research. The book on Askaban was becoming less of a book and more of an exposé now. She had no idea that when she began to dive into the establishment it would reveal so many inconsistencies. Which is why she planned to sneak into McLaggen’s office today.

But first, she allowed herself to use her favorite bathroom. She walked into Draco’s bedroom. The room he still used occasionally when he stayed here. The room held the echoes

of teenage Draco. Slytherin flags and Quidditch posters still hung on the wall. Small trophies and knick-knacks on the shelves. Hermione used to think it smelled like him faintly. The clean, woody undertone of the room and in his closet seemed to linger, but now she knew for certain he smelled so much better than anything in here, but she still couldn't help but stop by.

The first time she saw the room was during a tour of the manor Narcissa gave her years ago. And she'd snuck in occasionally ever since. There was a sense of satisfaction being inside her bully's childhood bedroom. She liked to mess with his stuff. The first time she snuck in she resized all his shoes. Maybe that's why she lingered in his closet, brushing her fingers against his green jumpers, suits, and white oxfords that were not the magical kind. Her ego hadn't allowed her to ask about the magical shirt yet. She wasn't ready to admit she'd stolen it from him and he hadn't asked for it back. It was on her list of a dozen other things to talk to him about.

For old time's sake she cast an itching hex on his sheets before using his bathroom and brushing her teeth. She paused. An odd realization occurred that he used the same muggle toothpaste she did. She never ran out of it because her father got it wholesale and gave it to all of his patients, plus he sent it to her every few months as well. A few weeks ago she'd assumed it was a coincidence, but now? He was copying her on purpose. *Sexy, creepy wizard*

Afterwards she apparated to an alley around the corner of the DMLE building. While technically the DMLE had wards that stopped most witches and wizards from using notice-me-not charms, Hermione Granger was not like most magical folks. She found a loophole that would allow her to maneuver through those wards and place the charm outside the building. She walked through the front doors and not a single person looked her way. The downside of maneuvering through those protective charms was that her notice-me-not wouldn't last very long, twenty minutes at most and it couldn't be re-cast while still in the building. Hermione would have to be quick with her snooping.

Cormac McLaggen was a mid level supervisor in the DMLE and that meant he mostly dealt with paperwork and had his hand in a little bit of everything. Hermione wrinkled her nose at how easy it was to get through his office wards. For being a person in leadership he seriously needed more security, not that she was complaining, of course. His lapse in judgment was serving her quite well.

What his office lacked in security measures made up for in disorganization, which didn't help the ticking clock that her charm held. She sat in his chair and thumbed through several piles of paperwork left on his desk. He did have the good sense to prevent any accios from being cast because her attempt was blocked multiple times. So it was manual labor and after five precious minutes she finally found the file.

Yes, this would be very helpful indeed.

The paperwork listed the last few hires for the board of Azkaban and a list of guards currently employed. Anthony Goldstein worked as a lead guard there and she would plan her visit while he was on duty. After opening several drawers and not finding anything useful, she found a filing cabinet without any protective wards, just a simple lock she was able to undo

all too easily with a wish of her wand, “Alohomora.” She whispered. The cabinet clicked open.

Gods he was an idiot. A helpful idiot, but still an idiot.

A loud knock on the door froze Hermione in her seat.

The door swung open as an elderly witch poked her head in. “McLaggen?” She scanned the room with beady eyes, falling on Hermione for a beat too long. Hermione’s heart pounded roughly against her chest, she trusted her magic, but it was still a nerve wracking experience. The witch finally moved out with a grumble and a loud clack of the door. Hermione released a shaky breath and got back to work. It took several long minutes for her to find the other file she came for.

The file on Susan Bones was limited. She had previously worked as an advisor in the Department of Intoxicating Substances before being fired when a large amount of highly regulated substances were stolen under her watch and was currently under investigation by the DMLE. Hermione read the rest of the information and then grabbed the files he left on his desk. She could feel the charm wearing thin and wanted to duck out of there before anyone spotted her. After all the files were copied and replaced where she’d found them, she tucked hers safely into her beaded bag and left his office.

Only a few paces away from the lift she heard her name called and she stopped.

“Hermione?”

Damnit. Ron’s voice caused several others to look her way there was no way she could feign hearing loss now. She turned reluctantly. He walked toward her with Cormac McLaggen trailing behind him, who greeted her with an annoying wink.

“Hello.” She said politely as they both approached her. “I’m in a rush so I can’t stay and chat.”

“What are you doing here?” Ron’s brow furrowed.

Hermione smiled. “Whatever I want to.”

His expression turned into a slow sneer. “I wanted to owl you about breakfast, but it seems you’re too busy being whored out to Malfoy’s friends.” McLaggen’s jaw tightened as he clutched the paper the Daily Prophet in his hand. “Yeah Granger.” Cormac said. “You seem to be making all the rounds these days.”

Hermione ignored McLaggen. “I wouldn’t have accepted your invitation to breakfast after your display at the Halloween Party.” Hermione crossed her arms. “You made it very clear how you feel about me and my choices Ron. Your fiance also doesn’t care for me. I’m sure she doesn’t want you hanging around with a muggle born like me.”

“Do you hear yourself, Hermione?” He said, his patronizing tone made Hermione feel like she was swallowing acid. “You’re talking down about yourself already. Malfoy hates you and

he's making you hate yourself. Next you'll be claiming purebloods are superior.”

“Do you hear *yourself*, Ron?” Hermione couldn’t hold her anger back. “We used to be best friends and you’ve changed so much I hardly know who you are anymore. If you can’t be happy for me or at least keep your mouth shut, I don’t want to go to breakfast with you.”

“We are friends Hermione. I’m the only friend you have that is talking any sense to you!” Ron snapped loudly and Hermione flinched. She cursed herself. She would not be afraid of him.

“Right, you want to go to breakfast with me and yet you stand there calling me a whore.” Hermione’s nose flared with a sharp intake of breath. “What kind of friend does that?”

“I’m trying to get your attention. I’m trying to get you to see what’s happening to you!” Ron replied. Others had gathered around whispering to one another. This would inevitably end up in the gossip column.

“Don’t you dare try to tell me that calling me a whore is for my benefit.” She scoffed. “I’m happy Ron. I’m happy and you should just let me be happy.” She practically pleaded. “I’m happy for you and Daphne. Did you forget she’s also a slytherin?”

“It’s not the same at all.” Ron sneered as he grabbed the paper out of McLaggen’s hands. Unfolding it in front of her face.

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” She let out a frustrated breath. In big bold letters the Prophet exclaimed:

#### DRACO MALFOY CRUSHED BY HEARTACHE FLEES TO AMERICA AS HERMIONE GRANGER CAUGHT TANGLED UP WITH BLAISE ZABINI IN BOOKSTORE .

An image of Blaise holding Hermione’s chin looking into her eyes flashed back and forth. She looked rough in the picture, her hair a mess, her hand holding onto his arm for stability. Of course they’d go with the slut angle.

Hermione shook her head. “You seriously believe this?” She pushed the paper out of her face.

“I don’t want to, but it’s hard to trust your judgment these days when you’re courting fucking Malfoy. Merlin, if your past self could see you now. He hated you then Hermione and he still hates you now and you’re succumbing to his- his- his fetish!” Hermione could feel the thick disdain rolling off of him like a sour odor. It made her skin cold.

“I could say the same thing about you.” She hissed. “You are nothing like you used to be. You’ve changed into some egotistical bully.” She stepped forward. “And I don’t like who

you are anymore.”

Hurt flashed in his eyes before he tightened his jaw, shifting into indifference. “You always held me back, you know.” He let out a cold laugh. “Always bossing me around, pointing out my flaws, doubting my strategy skills, laughing at my ideas.” He gave her a cold smile. “You’ll see one day Hermione how important I am. When this all blows up in your face you’ll wish you listened to me. I hope you remember this moment, when you threw away the only person who really cared for your wellbeing. You’re about to give away your future to a fucking death eater.”

“Better to a death eater than to you.” She said, lifting her chin in the air.

Ron’s face betrayed him as anger, hot and sharp, flashed across his face, cheeks a shade of maroon. “No wonder Malfoy hates you.” He spat. “You probably cheated on me too.” He lifted a brow. “You must be pretty lonely to be cozying up to Zabini only two days after Malfoy leaves. You don’t have to be a death eater whore Hermione.”

“You have a good day Ronald.” Hermione breathed shakily. Her skin buzzed with magic, begging to be released. “And a good life.” She turned and walked away.

“You’ll come crawling back one day. Wishing you hadn’t left me.” Ron said loudly as she headed towards the lift. She held his stare as the doors closed, a placid smile on her face. She hadn’t planned to end their friendship like this, at first she wanted to remain friends with him because of their history but then she wanted to maintain a relationship with him for other selfish reasons. She was tired of putting on the charade though. It was too much work. He had no sense of logic, no sense of empathy. He was so different from the young boy she met on the train. Or was he? Sometimes she conflated Harry’s kindness with Ron’s. Ron also made fun of her their first year in school. *Harry* had been the one that was kind to her and cared about her feelings. *Harry* had been the one who defended her. *Not Ron*. Ron had always dragged his feet along and while he hadn’t always been cruel per say, he wasn’t very nice either. And she was done playing nice. She didn’t need him for the rest of her plan, she’d figure out how to handle it on her own.

She was moving through the lobby when Justin Finch-Fletchley marched towards her. “Your boyfriend got me fired from my job, Granger. What did I ever do to him?”

Her eyebrows rose to her hairline. Indignation striking down her spine. She didn’t have time or the patience for this. “I think it had to do with the fact that I got a concussion after you followed me through Flourish and Blotts.”

“What are you talking about?” He grimaced. “I did no such thing.”

“The healer I saw would say otherwise. Thanks by the way for splashing that photo of us all over the news.”

“I think you’re going batty Hermione.” Fletchley took a step back, giving her an incredulous glare. “One death eater isn’t good enough for you so you have to blame a fellow muggle born

for your poor choices to your boyfriend?"

"I'm leaving." She snapped, and sped walked out of the building.

When she finally appeared back in the study, Blaise lounged on a chair tossing a small ball in the air. "Working at the manor, did you say?" He said in that familiar aristocratic drawl that came out when the posh purebloods were confrontational in the most polite way possible. A combination of offense, condescension, and demand, making lesser folks answer to them.

"Yes." She said, plopping down in her own seat at the desk. "Just took a short break. I thought I told you not to bother me?" She arched her brow.

Blaise sighed. "Well seeing as we are having an illicit affair, I figured I needed to find you."

"Oh right." Hermione shook her head. "It's such a cliche take. Every man I interact with must be my lover. I'm so tired of it."

"This one took a new spin." He tossed her another edition of the Daily Prophet, one printed just half an hour ago.

#### IS THE GOLDEN GIRL BECOMING UNHINGED AND UNSTABLE? HER WILD BEHAVIOR TAKES A NASTY TURN AS HERMIONE GRANGER ATTACKS FAN IN BOOK STORE.

The image moved back and forth making it seem like she was aiming to hit someone with a spell. It showed Hermione spinning around with her wand out, a stern look on her face, bright wild eyes, she lifted her hand over her face to shield her eyes from Justin's flash.

*Lovely.*

"Attacking my mental health is a new low." Hermione tisked. "I'll need to speak to Narcissa and Pansy at some point about all the headlines."

Blaise sat up straighter. "I have your back, Granger." He looked at her with a somber expression. "You know that right? I've disavowed any blood purity ideology. I've enjoyed the conversations we've had and even the muggle movies you've forced me to watch."

Hermione smiled warmly. "I do as well, Blaise. I'm glad we're becoming friends."

"You can trust me though." He said. "I won't stop you from doing things you want to do. I won't interfere in your free will, but I also can't help keep you safe if you're lying about where you're at. Yesterday at the bookstore was my responsibility and if anything happened to you, I'd-"

She waved him off. "Malfoy's not my keeper Blaise."

"This has nothing to do with him. This is my job too. You're my client. And I'm good at my job, usually." He frowned. "If I have to be more sneaky, which apparently I do, to keep you

safe I will be, but it would be easier if you were just honest with me. I didn't think a Gryffindor would be so...so Slytherin." He smirked.

Hermione pursed her lips. "You're right." She sighed. "I misled you. I'm not sorry about it, but I will take your feedback and try to give you a little more notice about my plans."

"So slytherin." He chuckled, shaking his head. "The witch won't even apologize for her lies."

"Maybe that should be the next headline about me." She smirked.

Pilly appeared with a crisp snap. "Miss!"

"Hi Pilly." Hermione sighed, today was not turning out the way she wanted it to. "I thought I said no interruptions?"

Pilly tilted her head. "Mistress needs you at once. Miss Parkinson is here as well." Hermione frowned. She wasn't going to get any of her work done now and it was hard for her to accept. She had imagined a quiet afternoon being lost in her work and all of that was going down the drain. Plus her pain potion was wearing off and that ringing in her head would be back with a raging vengeance.

"I'll be there soon." Hermione said as her phone buzzed. Draco was calling her. Pilly nodded and disappeared.

"I'll update them on everything else while you take that." Blaise stood and left.

Her stomach twisted before answering. "Hi."

"Are you alright?" He said, his words rushed.

"Yes, I'm fine." She replied, "Are you alright?"

"Harry got a call that Weasley was yelling at you in the hallways of the DMLE." Draco's voice was barely controlled.

"Oh. Word really does travel fast." Hermione sighed.

"What happened? What did he say to you?" Draco demanded.

"Nothing worth repeating."

"Hermione." His tone, a bit desperate to her ears, made her concede.

"He's just a jealous fool. He's so full of himself that he can't see past his own stupidity. He's really quite dumb." She huffed, as her anger came back in full force. "He tried to make fun of me using today's smear campaigns, while also asking me to breakfast. I made it clear to him I wouldn't tolerate his attitude towards you and he didn't like that."

Hermione waited with baited breath for Malfoy to question her about Blaise and accuse her of cheating on him.

“I don’t know how you’re friends with him.” He said, his voice hard and cold.

Hermione released a breath, “We aren’t friends anymore.” She said quietly. A strange sadness twisted through her. “Not after everything he said today. It would be a betrayal to myself to continue to tolerate his behavior.”

“Well I can’t say I’m saddened by that news, but I am sorry he hurt you.” Draco said. “And you’re sure you’re alright?”

“I’m perfectly fine. Actually no, I’m annoyed that I haven’t gotten any work done today, but other than that I’m okay.”

He chuckled. “In the midst of everything that’s going on that’s what you’re most upset about?”

“Yes, I like writing and today was supposed to be a writing day, but I’ve wasted all my brain’s precious energy on stupid things like speaking to Ron.” Hermione didn’t have the energy to explain her interaction with Justin so she didn’t mention it.

“I didn’t know a visit to the DMLE was on your schedule today.”

“Yes, for researching purposes.” She replied. “Any update on when you can come home?” she really tried not to ask the question but she couldn’t help it.

“No.” He said, his voice tense with frustration. “It’ll probably be a few more days. How are you feeling today? Is your head alright?”

“I took a pain potion this morning and it seemed to dull most of the symptoms. I’ll take another before bed tonight.”

“I’ll call you again tonight.” He replied.

“That’s really early in the morning for you though. You need to rest too.”

“I’ve somehow grown accustomed to sleeping next to a swotty witch who likes to steal the blankets.” Draco said. “I haven’t been sleeping well without her.”

“I can relate. A spoiled prat who takes up most of my bed with his freakishly long legs has somehow helped me get better sleep too.”

“It’s not my fault your bed is too small. Perhaps you need a new one.”

“Perhaps I do.” She said softly, an easy smile on her lips. “I’m looking forward to having you back in my bed regardless of the space you take up though.”

“I can’t wait to be sleeping with you again.” He replied and her cheeks flushed with spiky heat.

“It’s been a while.” Hermione bit her lip. “Since we’ve slept together that is.”

“It’s a shame really.” He purred in that voice that made her shiver. “I’ll be sure to remedy it quickly upon returning and take you straight to bed.” Her stomach flipped wildly in anticipation.

A magical crack. “Miss.” Pilly stood in front of her, tiny arms crossed as her small yet wide foot tapped the floor. “We are waiting.”

Hermione sighed. “I’m being summoned by the public relations committee.” Pilly stayed watching her with wide eyes, a bit of impatient judgment in them.

“Good luck, darling.”

“Darling is it?”

“It’s the only one you haven’t balked yet.” Draco replied. “I’m trying it out. There are other names I know you like, but I’ll save those for when we’re in bed.”

“Bye Draco.” she said quietly, her cheeks so pink it hurt.

“Goodbye darling.”

She was so grateful he hadn’t given any stock to what the headlines were suggesting. She would have judged him harshly for it. Anyone who believed headlines like today’s were not the kind of people she wanted to build relationships with. And it meant the world to her that he didn’t need to question her. Ron had always questioned her. Especially after they moved in together. Always pestering her about if colleagues were single or married, always insinuating they were flirting with her. It was a relief like a dark cloud being pulled out of the sky, revealing more sunlight. It was refreshing and uplifting to be trusted. She decided right then to shove down the rest of her insecurities. When Draco came back she’d give herself time before bringing up anything too heavy. She just wanted to relish in this feeling for a bit. Everything was so new, they’d only been interacting for a month, there was no need to rush those conversations.

After speaking with Pansy and Narcissa for over an hour they had a plan in place. They’d make a formal statement once Draco arrived home and they had their public date. But for now Hermione would just share things like normal online. She opened up her Wizardgram account. She had been promoting her book pretty heavily the last few weeks online, she posted frequently enough, but it still didn’t stop that buzzing sensation from flooding her chest as she uploaded a picture Pansy had taken of them at her book signing. It was a candid shot that she’d snuck in between the posed pictures they’d taken that night. He had one arm around her waist as he tucked a stray hair behind her ear. It looked like a half embrace as he caressed her cheek. Pansy said it looked romantic and would be the perfect picture to post. But she also scolded Hermione when Hermione wanted to post more pictures of Draco as Sexy Roger Rabbit. So Hermione compromised and posted both.

One of them at the book signing followed by the selfie she'd take of the two of them cheek to cheek. A simple caption: *A very happy witch.*

When she arrived home she knew there was no way her brain would allow her to work, she was ready to take a nap and rest her eyes with a cold wrapping spell around her head. Her mouth opened as she walked into her bedroom to find a new super king sized bed, a bouquet of red roses and a card that said:

*I adore you. Please rest well until I'm back.*

*I'll still crowd you in bed though.*

-DM

#### Chapter End Notes

Alexa play Adorn by Miguel followed by Adore you by Harry styles.

# Chapter 20

## Chapter Notes

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

Two more days passed before Draco decided to use his private muggle plane and fly home instead. The ministry kept losing his paperwork or denying his portkey which Hermione could tell was only increasing his ire. He had tried to play by the ministry's rules, but she was glad he found an alternate route.

*"I'll be home tonight. I cannot wait to see you."* He told her this morning.

She paced anxiously around her living room. He'd be here soon and she couldn't stop moving. She was trying to be normal. She was trying to miss him the normal appropriate amount. But his rich, coaxing voice kept replaying in her head.

*"I'll be home tonight. I cannot wait to see you."*

*Home.* He didn't specify which home. Could he go to his flat? The manor? What if he wanted to shower? Or maybe he'd be tired and not want to come here at all. Surely if he said he couldn't wait to see her, he'd come here too right?

She looked down at her sweatpants and jumper.

Maybe she should wear something a little bit sexier in case he wasn't sure she'd want to have sex, because she desperately did. And she wanted to be very clear about it.

He'd been gone for five days and Hermione was starving.

That's how it felt. Starved and hollow inside.

Her walk-in closet was well organized and she stripped off her pants. She dug through a drawer that held non-winter clothes in search of some cute shorts. She tossed clothing out haphazardly, bikinis and coverups flying through the air. How did that get in there?

She pulled a silver and white beanie out of the drawer. This wasn't supposed to be in her summer clothing next to bathing suits and vacation clothes. She placed the beanie on her head. It was a great hat. *Wait.* She had matching mittens somewhere and wasn't there coordinating a scarf? She dug through her winter things and found the whole set. She needed to wear them this winter. They were so cute. As she left her closet to look in her mirror it took her a full minute to notice Draco.

And that's how he found her.

In a large green jumper, silver mittens, scarf and beanie. *Without pants on.*

He leaned against the door frame, in a tight fitting, black long sleeve shirt and black jeans.

He looked so muggle, so gorgeous.

“That’s quite the ensemble Granger.” He said, a sexy smirk on his lips.

She found herself running the short distance to him.

He moved as soon as she did. She jumped and he scooped her into his arms. His mouth crashed into hers. Her legs wrapped around him, as his hands gripped her bare bum. They kissed passionately as he backed her into the wall. Pressing his body into hers. She squeezed her thighs tighter around him. His hand cupped her neck, threading tightly into her hair.

She kissed him as if he were about to disappear and for so long she became almost became self conscious.

She couldn’t stop though, instead she tightened her arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

They kissed and kissed and kissed until her lips were sore.

They finally broke apart, but when she met his eyes, hungry and heated, she wanted to jump back into kissing him.

“Hi.” He said, his nose brushing hers.

“I have a shower.” She blurted. “In case you want to shower.”

The corner of his mouth tugged. “Thanks for the offer.”

“I didn’t know what you’d want to do when you got back. Or if you were going home first or-“

“I want to do this.” He leaned in and kissed her again. Long and slow. She felt it all the way down to her toes.

“I missed you.” Hermione said immediately after he pulled away.

“I missed you.” Draco repositioned his arms and moved to the bed. He tried to lay her down but she pulled him with her. They landed on her bed with a small thud.

She tried to brush her fingers through his hair when she remembered what she was wearing. Her cheeks flushed and she released her grip around his neck, tugging the mittens off.

He grinned. “Keep them on if you want. You make mittens look sexy.”

“But then I can’t touch you.” She said finally touching his face, he turned kissing her palm.

“Do you like touching me, darling?”

"I do." She said quietly. They stared at each other while she dragged her fingertips gently across his face, and then traced his lips. He darted his tongue out licking her.

He lifted up slightly and began unwinding the scarf around her neck.

"I like touching you too." He said cupping her face. "I like kissing you." He kissed her cheek.

Then her nose. Then her lips. Her chin. Her jawline.

"I like you." He whispered near her ear. "I like you a lot." He kissed her neck. "I like the way you smell. I like the way you laugh. I like the way you look without pants on." He smiled against her skin and his hands went to her waist, gripping onto her hips. "I like the way you feel underneath me." He rolled his hips as his hands moved back up her body underneath her jumper. She let out a breathy moan as he slid his hands over her stomach and over her breasts and back down again to her waist. "You're so soft." He lifted the jumper over her head, taking the beanie with it. "I really like how you look without clothes on."

"I like you without clothes too." Hermione gave him a pointed look.

His smug smile was almost too much to handle. "Oh yeah?"

He used one hand and tugged his shirt off and her breath hitched as he stood in front of her.

She shook her head in disbelief. "You have such a slutty waist."

He choked a laugh. "What?"

She moved toward the edge of the bed. Now only in her lacy black knickers. She splayed her hands over his abdomen, roaming over the v shape of his hips. She looked at him before bending forward and licking across his abs. "So slutty."

His eyes flared as she began undoing his jeans and pushing them down down his well defined thighs. She palmed his cock through his black briefs and he let out a hiss. She stroked him again, relishing in his thickness. His hand caught hers before she could stoke him more. "I like your tattoos too." She said as she shamelessly ogled his body. "I really like them, actually." He gently pushed her shoulders down and she gladly fell back onto the bed as he crawled on top of her.

"Will you ever get a tattoo?" He asked, cupping her face and brushing her cheeks with light strokes.

"Perhaps one day." She shrugged. Hermione hadn't felt strongly one way or another.

"I have an idea for one." He smiled slyly, he lifted up, tracing a finger across her chest in swirling script. "Draco Malfoy. Right here." He moved his fingers to her arms "And Draco Malfoy across here." He dragged a finger down the racing pulse in her neck. "And Draco Malfoy here."

Hermione cackled. "I'm supposed to walk around like an advertisement for you?" She wrapped an arm loosely around his neck. "Something like that." He whispered before leaning in and giving her another toe curling kiss.

That was all it took before they were lost in kissing again. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between them that they were not in a rush, instead they were leisurely making up for all the time they spent not having sex, nor kissing. Hermione's leg wrapped around his waist anchoring him down. Draco countered by grabbing her wrists and pinning them above her head. His large hand slid through hers and her stomach dropped in big swoosh similar to jumping off the high dive at swimming pool, causing her hips to grind against his length. He pulled away, hovering just above her lips. He whispered. "Already flushed and needy." His nose brushed hers sending a tight tingling sensation down her spine. "Are you already wet for me too baby, so ready for me to fuck you?" She was, she was so ready. She couldn't create any coherent words, she just nodded, a quiet whimper on her lips.

"My perfect, beautiful witch." He kissed her with such tenderness it was hard to breathe and she no longer wanted to take her time, she wanted him right now. Her pulse was clipped and loud, like a galloping horse's pounding hooves against pavement. "It's like you were made for me." He murmured against the shell of her ear. She rolled her hips in response, relishing in the friction of his hard cock again. This was really going to happen. She moaned again, louder this time and she tried to pull her arms away from Draco's grip to get some leverage in this situation. He clucked his tongue at her. "I'm not letting you go darling." He kissed her again, so tenderly and soft. Hermione tried to deepen the kiss but he just pulled his head up with an amused grin. "Why are you in such a rush? Be a good girl and stay still for me." Her whole body flushed with spiky heat, running up down the sides of her body, like she was being repeatedly tapped lightly with thumbtacks. She rolled her eyes, she had no patience anymore.

"Is it really so hard to let me kiss you and compliment you?" He pressed another impossibly soft kiss on her cheek, then whispered near her ear. "You should really get used to it, I'll never stop."

"Teasing and taunting me?" She asked breathlessly, his fingers flexed in her hands, tightening his grip around hers.

"Kissing and complimenting you." He smiled above her, then rolled his eyes. "Okay, yes, teasing and taunting as well." She wanted to memorize the view of him on top of her, she loved the weight of him there, he leaned down to kiss her again.

"Malfoy!" Blaise shouted, right before his lips touched hers.

"I said no interruptions Blaise!" Draco called back.

"I told him that too but he doesn't listen." Hermione whispered in panting breath.

"You need to see this." Blaise replied. Hermione sighed, her hopes deflating like a balloon. Disappointment tasted bitter.

“This is why I was in a rush.” Hermione hissed at Draco. He smirked. “I promise to make sure you’re completely satisfied soon.”

A few minutes later Hermione and Draco were sadly dressed and sitting at the table in front of Blaise’s computer.

“I was going over the footage of today’s security cameras outside of Hermione’s flat and found this.”

The video played and an icy chill wound down Hermione’s spine. Draco walked in front of her flat, stood there and stared at her window, staring straight into the camera lens and then waved. He placed his hands in his pockets and watched the house for several minutes, all the while wearing a disturbing smile he often directed at the camera with wave. He eventually sauntered off, but not before blowing a kiss at the front door.

“After seeing this.” Blaise continued. “I decided to check street cameras from the past week around the neighborhood as well” He tapped a few buttons and pulled up several small squares each showing a different angle of her neighborhood. “He shows up throughout the week, never at the same time, each time is less than five minutes. He couldn’t get past the wards though.”

“Until today.” Hermione’s lips pursed. “He has the runic stone and bypassed the wards.” Her lips curled in disgust. What kind of game did this person think they were playing? How dare they taunt her like she was powerless. Hermione stared at the laptop, her breathing sharp, her magic hot against her fingertips. The lights flickered in her flat.

A cool hand laid on her thigh. “We will find them.” Draco’s voice anchored her. “We will find them, I promise.”

“Thank you Blaise.” Hermione finally said, “For finding this.” She still stared at the computer irritation sawing through her jagged edges.

“Of course.” He nodded. “I’m sure there is more footage and we can map out a solid strategy-”

“I mean this in the nicest way, but I need you to leave my house and not return until tomorrow morning.” She smiled sincerely. “Draco and I are busy for the remainder of the evening.”

Blaise’s eyebrows rose. “No need to say anymore. See you in the morning.” After he stepped through the floo, Hermione turned to find a dejected looking Draco.

“What’s wrong? Did you want Blaise to listen to us shagging? Or perhaps you wanted him to watch?” Hermione teased, but Draco’s eyes remained hard and despondent.

“I’m sorry,” He replied, shaking his head. “I’m sorry I’m not doing more for you. This shouldn’t have happened. This is fucking with my head.” He closed his eyes. “Using me against you like this is intentional. They want to hurt both of us. They’re ridiculing me and threatening you and I just...” He sighed. “I’m so sorry.”

Hermione moved to his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. His arms slid around her waist and they held one another for several minutes before Hermione spoke. "They're the only ones to blame, Draco. Some psychotic person is trying to use you to scare me and that's not your fault." His jaw tightened, he didn't say anything and didn't meet her gaze. Hermione huffed, already impatient. "Stop being so broody and take me to bed and make good on all those promises to kiss me and compliment me." He looked up at her then, his eyes not quite heated, but less melancholy.

She cupped his face with both of her hands. "We will find them, but they're not going to take my first night with you away. They planned this. I just know it. They've been in town much longer than you and yet they waited until today to walk by? They wanted to ruin our time together, they wanted to keep you away from me. Don't give them what they want." Her hands fell onto his shoulders, as she turned to straddle him in the chair. "Give me what I want." She kissed him again and he let out a long sigh. "I'll be very good for you." She pressed another kiss to his lips, aiming to mimic his feather-like approach, while she rolled her hips against him. He hummed in response. "You told me you'd spoil me." She rocked against him again and his eyes finally sparked. She whispered to his lips. "Your mother told me you would give me whatever I wanted."

He grimaced. "Please don't bring up my mother right before I make love to you." Hermione stilled and Draco's jaw clenched. "I didn't-I wasn't saying-

She cut him off with a kiss. "Kiss me and compliment me." She whispered roughly. He finally kissed her back as he stood moving toward her bedroom. "Make good on the things you're promising me, Draco."

"Alohomora." Draco called. Her bedroom door flew open.

Hermione immediately kicked off her sweatpants as he set her down and pulled off his shirt. "Thank you for my new bed by the way."

"Our bed." He corrected her. "You share with me, remember? It's ours." He gave her a lingering wet kiss.

"Didn't you give it to me as a gift?" She asked, lifting off her jumper, then flung her lacy black kickers at him.

Her caught them and held them to his face, his eyes fluttering shut as he inhaled deeply. She swallowed hard, her blood was near boiling.

"It is only yours conditionally." He said taking off his pants, his eyes hooking into a heady thigh clenching look. Watching him unbuckle his belt sent a delicious heat down to her core and when he was completely naked before her, her core throbbed like a beating drum.

"Do all your gifts come conditionally?" She said laying flat against the bed as he crawled over her. He kissed her thighs, then licked across her stomach, he sucked hard and quick on her breasts and then on each of her nipples. He tilted his head above her. "Of course, or I wouldn't be a Malfoy."

He settled between her thighs, his hard cock pressing against her core, but not angled right to get closer. She wrapped her arms around his middle. “You’re supposed to be spoiling me during courtship, not creating terms and conditions.”

“I would say that’s exactly what we’re supposed to be doing, darling. We are creating a courting contract filled with terms and conditions.” He leaned down on his elbows, whispering in her ear. “And I think you’re going to really like the terms and conditions” His fingers threaded through her hair at the base of her neck. “Would you like to hear them?”

“Enlighten me.” She squirmed underneath, aching for some traction against her clit, but he just pushed her down harder into the mattress with his hips, making it practically impossible to move.

“Well first and foremost you must sleep in this bed with me every night. Unless we are traveling.” He kissed gently on her neck. “And second, you must come at a minimum twice daily in this bed, by my tongue, by my fingers, or by my cock. Come all you want on your vibrator, but it doesn’t count towards my quota.” He kissed her chin, her breathing was shallow. “Lastly, let me take you to breakfast tomorrow.” He whispered against her lips. She kissed him quickly, biting his lip as he tried to pull away. She could feel his dark chuckle against her skin as it curled low in her stomach. She adjusted her hips slightly, spreading wider. The throbbing picked up speed.

“So if I sleep with you, come from you, and go to breakfast tomorrow, then the mattress is mine?” She panted, quietly.

“The mattress is ours. You get to sleep on this mattress if you agree to the terms.” His thumb coasted across her cheekbone, her skin shivering as a rush of heat spread between her legs.

She nodded “If I agree to sex and a date and then I get access to the mattress. And what happens if I don’t agree?”

“I take the mattress away obviously.” He arched his brow. “This mattress is perfect. You’ll never be able to sleep without it.”

Hermione arched her brow back. “Would you take away sex?”

“No, of course not. I’d never do that to myself.” Draco frowned.

Hermione held his gaze and his words clicked in place with a deep appreciation of his cleverness. He was teaching her about courtship.

“So if I were to sign an official courting contract with you, part of the terms and conditions would include the requirement to have sex twice daily, sleep with you unless either of us are traveling, and go on one date with you tomorrow morning, plus each night I’d sleep in this perfect mattress? And If I don’t agree. I can still have sex with you, go on a date with you, but there would be no extra perks.”

“Correct.”

"And this tells me there are much better perks when I'm officially courting a Malfoy versus not officially courting him."

"Precisely. I knew you'd understand." He kissed her. "So what's your answer?"

A slow blush spread across her face. "I accept your terms and conditions." She whispered.

"So will you officially court me, Hermione Granger. Will you tell the public your mine?" His rich voice skated across her skin. If she thought her body was on fire before she was wrong. Her body entered a new height of overwhelming molten heat, it raced through the lines of her body with urgency and the intimacy of the moment caught her off guard. "Yes, Draco." She whispered.

His smile was so delicate, almost emotional in nature. He dipped his head and kissed her languidly, his body finally rolling against hers. "I really like you." He kissed her again, his cock nudging her entrance, eliciting a moan from her. His mouth captured hers and the subsequent noise that erupted from her as he slid inside her without warning. Their tongues tangled together as their bodies began moving in unison, cohesive like a well practiced orchestra.

"Fuck." He groaned. "You feel even better than I remember."

Hermione agreed, pulling his mouth back to hers. She hadn't built it up in her head. She hadn't been dramatic the first time they fucked. It was heavenly. His hand gripped the back of her neck pulling her tighter against him. Her mouth opened wider for him. She wanted to capture more of his mouth, More of his skin. More of tongue. More of everything. He sucked on her lip as her nails raked down his back gripping his bum sinking her nails into him. She wanted him closer to her body, closer against her skin, closer insider her.

He pulled away from her lips, kissing lazily down her neck, with a slow suction each time. "You feel so good." His hips moved faster, thrusting harder. "So perfect for me."

"Draco." She whimpered.

"You're perfect for me, Hermione." He kissed the other side of her neck licking and sucking his way up back to her mouth. "You're a good girl. Such a fucking good girl." Her legs hooked around his thighs, shaking as he went deeper inside her. She kissed him hard, her hands cupping his face. She was already close to falling apart.

"Draco." She moaned. He slowed slightly, grabbing her hands, pinning them to each side of her head, intertwining their fingers. "Look at me." He whispered. She opened her eyes, and the weight of his stare hit her like a tidal wave crashing through her with a shuddering force.

"Good girl." He purred as their bodies moved in sync. "I want your eyes on me. I want you to look at me the entire time you're coming. I never want you to forget who makes you feel this way. Understood?"

"Yes." She said, her hands tightening in his grip.

“Do you want me to make you come?” He asked her quietly.

“Gods, yes.” She said rocking her hips with his

“Tell me how much you’ve been thinking of coming on my cock.”

“Every day.” She panted. “Everyday I’ve thought about you inside me.”

“Good.” He hooked his hips into hers, shifting his movement to small rolling thrusts.

“Oh fuck.” She squeezed her eyes closed at the sensation that rippled through.

“Eyes on me baby.” His voice was sinfully sweet, so caring and gentle, yet completely in control of her. Her eyes fluttered back open.

“That’s it. You’re doing so good.” He kissed her and the sweep of his tongue going straight to her core. He leaned his forehead against hers, increasing his speed and she could feel the momentum building faster and faster, tightening and coiling. She was breathing hard now, her fingernails dug into his hands. She started moaning. “Oh gods. Oh gods.”

“Yes, keep going, pretty girl.” He breathed. His voice was ragged and her core fluttered at the sound of him. She was so close. That tight coil was beginning to come apart, as a short burst of pleasure coursed through her like a shooting star. It zipped through her in a bright rush. She loudly moaned in response.

“Yes, yes, yes.” He chanted. “That’s it, good girl. That’s it.” Another star shot across her body and she panted loudly through the pleasure. “Good job.” He said in a lazy drawl. It had an overwhelming impact on her, heightening her senses as another shooting star raced through her. The orgasm was in slow motion. Or maybe it was multiple at once as he continued thrusting into her with a delicious rolling movement. Her mind was on sensory overload as it bounced between stimuli. *His ragged breathing from his mouth hanging above hers, his eyes full of fervent heat, his hands' bruising grip, the blissful feeling of his cock filling her deeply.* “Good job.” He responded to more of her mewling. *Oh gods, oh gods oh gods.* Shooting stars filled her body like her body was the night sky and her orgasm was a meteor shower. Her body arched to the strong surge of pleasure as a long guttural moan erupted from her. He continued moving with her as each star cascaded through her body, holding her gaze the entire time with an electric tension between them. “There is nothing like this.” He whispered as she came. “Nothing like watching you come undone underneath me. My favorite thing in the world. I’m obsessed with you Hermione.” He kissed her again, greedily.

When he finally slowed, she was breathing in short hard breaths, as she unwinded her legs and he released her hands. “I need a short break, but I’m not done with you.” She flexed her fingers as he pulled out of her. She already missed the fullness of him.

“It’s adorable you think you’re in charge.” He smirked, stroking her hair. “Would you rather take a shower with me and go to bed, or take a shower with me and sit on my face afterward, or take a shower and then after hold onto the headboard for dear life while I take you from

behind?" She was a puddle all over again. She swallowed. "You really want to shower with me."

"I haven't done it before." He replied softly. She never thought she'd describe Malfoy with so many various descriptions of soft and gentle, but he was. He was so soft with her, warm, gentle, and comforting. "I want to cross it off my Hermione Granger bucket list."

"You have a list, do you?"

His brows knit together with a sly smile. "Of course I do." Her breathing had finally returned to a normal rhythm. "Well I guess you'll just have to wait for my answer after the shower." She said, but she already knew what she was going to choose.

## Chapter End Notes

Alexa play Mine by Sleep Token followed by Earned it by The Weekend.

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

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

“Do you like that?” He whispered into her ear.

The steam billowed around them in the shower as two of his fingers slowly circled her clit before dipping inside her. He had her against the corner of the shower wall, but only after he insisted on washing her hair and her body.

“Yes.” Hermione’s eyes closed as he breathed against her neck. He was going very slow, almost like he wanted to just explore her pussy lazily. He circled and then pressed his fingers inside her, while peppering wet kisses to her cheeks. His tattooed arm was braced above her against the wall and she was sure she’d never imagined anything sexier than this moment.

“So when will I see your courting contract?” She managed to say.

“We haven’t created our contract yet.” He replied, teeth tugging on her earlobe.

“You asked me to court you and you don’t have a contract?”

“Correct. We are going to create it together.” He kissed her lips as his long fingers slid inside her again, curling as he pulled out, then pressed inside her again, hitting a spot that sent short trickling waves of pleasure through her. “Line by line.” He kissed her again.

She smiled, chest heaving as his fingers circled her clit. “You mean bribe by bribe.”

His eyebrows rose. “Are you accusing me of bribing you to court me?”

“You *are* bribing me.”

He kissed as he moved his fingers back inside. “Is it working?”

“For now.” She exhaled. Her hands fell from his neck reaching for his hard cock.

“Not yet.” He jerked his hips away.

Hermione furrowed her brow. “You haven’t come yet.”

“Because I’m selfish.” He rasped. “The more I witness your pleasure, the better mine is.” He increased his speed with his deft fingers, she grabbed back onto his neck, needing the support. “Every time you come, it makes my own release that much more powerful.” His thumb swirled around her clit. “I want you to come because I’m greedy.” Her breath hitched as his mouth possessively landed on hers, his fingers began working her harder and harder until her core clenched around his fingers. She moaned loudly as the eruption of pleasure

zigzagged through her, clinging to him and panting hard. He pulled away from her too soon, licking his fingers and then dropping down to his knees.

Before she could catch her breath his mouth was on her cunt. He placed one of her legs over his shoulder while he devoured her with his tongue. A bone vibrating moan came out of him, that had her gasping for air. A second wave of pleasure was already building, twisting through her with ferocity. She looked down at him and his eyes were already on her, water dripped down his face and hair. *Gods he was so beautiful*. One of his hands stroked over her bum, and down the thigh that was over his shoulder. He slid his hand back up, cupping her ass before one of his fingers swirled around the entrance of it.

“Oh my gods.” She planted her hands on either side of the wall. His tongue swirled and sucked as his rogue finger moved slowly into her hole. He wasn’t very deep, but the intensity made her grit her teeth and the walls of her core fluttered. His fingertip moved in a circular motion, as his tongue began roughly licking her clit. Her body began sputtering with sharp jolts of pleasure that were bordering on painful. It was an overwhelming type of fullness to be touched there and it took her a moment to relax in to it. Once her body started to relax more, the pleasure built, and built, and built. Then he sucked on her clit and she shattered. Her whole body stiffened, before a pulsating pleasure flooded her body starting from her ass, then inside her core, then her clit. She was vibrating with ecstasy, shaking with it, as she sank her hands into his hair and rode his mouth through each long wave.

Ten minutes later Hermione was gripping the headboard as his cock nudged her entrance. His hand ran up the length of her spine. “Draco Malfoy right down your spine would look so nice.” His smug tone made her roll her eyes. “And where are your Hermione Granger tattoos going to go?” His chuckle was dark and smoky. “I’ll get as many as you’d like.”

“A thousand?” She glanced over her shoulder.

“Consider it done.” Draco’s cock twitched against her entrance. “Hold on tight darling.” He pressed inside of her and his hands were against her hips, in a bruising grip as he began thrusting inside of her. She was a bit sore from everything they’d already done, but she enjoyed this position so much. She liked how erotic and carnal it felt, it itched an internal scratch in her, but she knew it wasn’t only about the position, but who was behind her. Draco drove into her with such controlled force, hard and fluid. He didn’t just slide in and out, but he rolled his hips so well, hitting a spot that was a different level of pleasure.

He leaned over her, placing his hand on top of hers on the headboard, his other arm wrapped around her waist. His movements slowed as he spoke into her ear. “I dreamt about this every fucking night.” He kissed along her shoulder and she her whole body was tingling. “You’re literally a dream come true baby.” His rasping, panting breaths, had her back arching into him. “You ready to come for me again?”

She let out a mewling, “Yes.”

“Good, because I’m about to fill you up with my come. That’s what you want, huh?” He rasped.

"Oh gods." She yelled out as his middle finger began swirling around her clit and he drove into her faster and harder.

"You feel so good, Hermione. You have no idea. You're a dream. Such a fucking dream." He kissed her shoulder, dragging his teeth against her neck and back down. The sensitive skin there tingled with a slow snaking heat down her back. "Come with me baby, be a good girl and let me feel you come."

"Okay." She squeaked, she could hardly breathe. Her legs wrapped around his knees, pulling tight. "That's it, keep going. You're doing such a good job."

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." She panted. He breathing just as hard as she was, his voice low and raspy. "Yes Hermione, yes, yes." He moaned, "Oh yes, baby." They came together in a mixture of loud moans and curse words. Hermione's body arched as his finger slid across her clit through every surge of pleasure. They collapsed on their bed, but he stayed on top of her, kissing her shoulders, intertwining their fingers. "I'd keep you here all night, under me like this if I didn't think it would suffocate you."

"Thank you for wanting me to live." She sighed, relishing in his body weight.

An hour later Hermione was on her back with a sleeping Draco draped across her, absentmindedly stroking his hair. She was the most relaxed she'd been in months. Her mind drifted to the last time they'd slept together. The weeks following that experience with him in Paris, Hermione had convinced herself the alcohol influenced how she felt against his body. That everything she felt with him was exaggerated because of it. She reasoned it had enhanced her senses and deepened the connection she felt with him. But it hadn't...

And she couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't the first time he'd made love to her. *Which was insane.* Truly you couldn't make love to someone you weren't in love with. And you certainly couldn't make love to someone the first time sleeping with them. Hermione was too smart to be insane. Or otherwise she might start to believe he loved her. And she couldn't possibly love him. It would be insane to love someone you just started sleeping with again. *And she was not insane.*

Did that make Draco insane? Perhaps a little. On the outside he presented as a funny, charismatic, smart, slightly broody, but normal person. However, the more questions she asked, the more he was increasingly *not* normal. Something else lurked beneath him, but did it rival her own abnormalities? Her stomach tightened. The urge to flee clawed under her skin, reminding her she wasn't safe, but as she listened to his breathing, felt the weight of his arms against her, the feel of his hair tangled in her fingers, she concluded she could enjoy his insanity. Especially when he made her feel so good, over and over and over again. Yes, she could enjoy him, that was allowed. That was not insane. Hermione Granger was not insane, but she could enjoy someone else's insanity.

Three days later Hermione and Draco announced their official courtship statement.

Narcissa practically held Padma Patil at wand point as she interviewed them. Padma was gracious and kind, but still wrote a hard hitting article.

**DRACO MALFOY AND HERMIONE GRANGER CONFIRM COURTSHIP IN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**

By Padma Patil

8th of November.

*No one in the wizarding world has gone the last week without hearing the rumors that Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy are a couple. When I was invited to hear their official confirmation, I knew the readers of Witch's Weekly Magazine would be thrilled to hear it straight from the source. I sat in a beautiful sitting room at Malfoy Manor where Draco Malfoy looked absolutely smitten with Britain's best selling author Hermione Granger.*

*Most of the wizarding world was surprised to hear the rumors of their courtship. The two had been spotted together in various public settings, including at Hermione's recent book release party, where most notably Draco Malfoy had been photographed for the first time at a wizarding event in five years. It's not a secret that the wizarding world waited for the Malfoy heir to return. Many had speculated where he went and what he did with his time while he was gone, but there were even more predictions about what he'd do upon his return. No one guessed that he'd return and almost immediately begin courting a witch, let alone Hermione Granger. So of course the very first question I asked the couple is if the rumors were true. I already knew the answer by the way they looked at each other, but it was important to have the confirmation come from the couple themselves. I asked, "On record, I'd like to know if the courtship rumors are true. Are you two courting one another?"*

*The Malfoy heir turned to the Golden girl for the answer. Seeing Draco defer to Hermione was another confirmation for me, but she officially confirmed being in a relationship with Draco. "Yes. We are truly courting."*

*I asked the most obvious question next.*

*"Your courtship is off to an unusual start, most announce it much differently than this. Why have you two waited to confirm your relationship?"*

*Draco answered this question. "Hermione and I were friends first and my interest in her increased significantly the more we spent time together. Both of us come from different backgrounds and cultures, I didn't want to put any pressure on her to conform to what certain traditions dictate."*

*I was impressed with his answer, but there were still a burning question I knew our audience needed to know. I asked, "Speaking of different backgrounds. It's no secret about how much you two disliked each other at Hogwarts, not to mention the Malfoy family's involvement with*

*Voldemort. There is a significant amount of people who believe your relationship couldn't be real based on this fact alone, what do you have to say about that?"*

*"I did dislike Draco." Hermione said. "But I also related to him in ways that may be surprising to most people. The war was complicated, I don't believe Draco had a choice in his position in the war. And as a child soldier myself, I'm still reconciling with the decisions adults made for me. In a lot of ways, Draco and I are the same. And if anything I think our courtship is the ultimate example of what can happen when a society can move past harmful rhetoric like blood supremacy."*

*While I listened to Hermione's heartfelt response, I couldn't help but watch Draco's reaction. The wizard isn't known for being emotional, but what I saw was an intimate moment I wasn't expecting. Malfoy didn't speak for several minutes as he looked down at their joined hands. Hermione didn't seem to expect his reaction either and she leaned into him, whispering something private, and pressed a kiss to his temple.*

*When he was ready to speak, he cleared his throat and said "I adore everything about Hermione Granger and anyone who believes otherwise is a fool."*

*I couldn't help the next question that came out of my mouth, "You two seem smitten with each other. Does this mean we could expect wedding bells in the near future?"*

*They both chuckled. Draco answered, "We are taking things slow. There's no need to rush things. We've only been formally courting a week."*

*"Speaking of." I said, "How did you two meet?"*

*"In the muggle world." Hermione responded. "It was quite random actually, a happy accident."*

*The couple before me held a kind of chemistry between them much too real to be fake. As for the future of the couple, we will have to wait and see. And if you're not convinced by this article, you might be convinced by Draco Malfoy's Wizardgram account, where he posts regularly now, including many several photos of the couple.*

*For more updates on wizarding pop culture follow Witch's Weekly Magazine on Wizardgram.*

The headlines for the following two weeks couldn't decide whether they liked Hermione and Draco's courtship or not.

HERMIONE GRANGER DATING ONE OF THE MOST WEALTHY WIZARDS ALIVE:  
GOLDEN GIRL OR GOLD DIGGER?

MALFOY GRANGER WEDDING TO BE LARGEST WIZARDING EVENT IN A CENTURY

HERMIONE GRANGER BETRAYS WAR HERO STATUS BY DATING DEATH EATER  
DRACO MALFOY

DRACO MALFOY COURTS MUGGLE BORN WITCH! A DISASTER WAITING TO  
HAPPEN! TEN TIPS FOR WHAT A PUREBLOOD WITCH CAN DO TO BOLSTER HER  
CHANCES AT COURTSHIP WHEN MALFOY INEVITABLY DUMPS HER

Hermione only paid attention to one article.

WILL HERMIONE GRANGER SUPPORT RON WEASLEY IN RUMORED UPCOMING  
MINISTRY OF MAGIC CANDIDACY?

Out of all her research and planning and gossiping sessions with Narcissa this had not been on her radar and it left her feeling unsettled.

She regretted ending their friendship and wondered if she should reach out to him. This certainly was not a coincidence. Perhaps Harry had some insight.

Draco and Hermione had settled into an easy routine together. They were having an obscene amount of sex. She usually woke up to Draco between her legs and his mouth on her thighs. It was always followed by a shower where she liked to repay his generosity. The first time she dropped onto her knees he choked. He didn't fit into her mouth, but she liked letting his cum spill down her chin. He always washed her body, while kissing her neck and massaged her head while shampooing her hair. Draco insisted they go out to breakfast almost daily.

Three days ago she leaned over inside the small restaurant to grab a napkin and he snapped a picture of her.

“That’s a keeper.” He smiled while adding it to his Wizardgram.

“Draco you can’t post that, it’s just mainly a picture of my cleavage.” Hermione frowned.

“I don’t understand the problem.” He said, giving her a blank stare.

“Your account can’t just be inappropriate pictures of me.” She replied.

“I disagree.” He shrugged. When Hermione looked at his account later his profile description read. *Inappropriate pictures of Hermione Granger*.

Draco usually left for his flat afterwards to work or meet up with Blaise for their special projects. Hermione was becoming increasingly cautious about the other parts of their work, but she was finally making more progress in her own research and a trip to Askaban was becoming necessary so she finally put in a request to visit. There were a few more things she’d like to understand before visiting so when her request was denied she simply filed another one.

Draco either sent her lunch or brought lunch to her. If he brought lunch, they always found themselves tangled in each other’s arms. It was ridiculous, honestly. They fucked in her kitchen, on her couch, in her shower, on their bed, on the floor, and today she found herself face down, pressed against her dining room table, her black tights ripped and shoved down, her skirt hiked all the way up. Draco’s hand wrapped around her ponytail. “Arch your back for me baby.” He said and she came with a sharp cry as he came with her. There was something about coming in tandem that really turned her on.

When she returned from her bedroom after changing her tights that got ripped in the process of their lunch date, there was a vase of red roses.

“Weekly flowers.” Draco said as he slipped on his coat. “That’s the next line in our courting contract.” He’d been giving her something almost everyday. New shoes, new dresses, fancy sheets for their bed, and he even restocked her shampoo and lotions.

“Your next bribe is flowers?” Hermione sniffed the beautiful roses. He said the same thing after every gift.

“Yes, if you’re mine you get weekly flowers.” He said, bending to kiss her. “I’ll be with Blaise for the rest of the afternoon. Are you still working on Askaban files?”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded. “Everytime I think I’m close to wrapping things up something else comes up. I’ll be working on it for a while.”

“Good luck.” He kissed her again and left.

Hermione had worked for nearly three hours straight. There was paperwork everywhere in her living room. She was a visual person and as she mapped out the paper trail, sherealized she needed access to the financial reports of Askaban. She owled Harry for assistance. The records were technically public records, but there was a mountain of paperwork to get through in order to obtain them. She asked him to bring the request forms to her meet and greet at Hogwarts in two days. She took a bathroom break, pausing at the sight of Draco’s toothbrush next to hers. They hadn’t really talked about their living arrangements. They slept

together every night, coordinated all their plans together. He still went to his flat everyday, but they had yet to discuss that detail either. They hadn't discussed anything that was serious in nature, besides updates about her security details, which these days hadn't been much.

Hermione wanted to enjoy Draco and she had, but that meant ignoring the inevitable upcoming conversations they had to have. She sighed. She wasn't ready to burst their bubble of joy.

When she passed her front window she stilled. Moving to the front of her fireplace, there were two windows on either side of it that faced the street, she reached for her phone and peered around to the window she had just passed.

Draco stood outside. Hands behind his back looking down the street and when he turned, the blood in her body turned to ice. He smiled with sinister delight as he waved. Her phone was already pressed to her face and he glanced at his watch.

“Darling?”

“Where are you?” She said her voice shaking. The outside Draco looked up at her as he tapped his foot against her wards. He still couldn’t get any closer to her front door, her wards were strong. He checked his watch again.

“The manor.” He said. “Are you alright?”

She swallowed. “He’s outside. You’re outside, Draco.” The call ended before she finished her sentence. And a second before Draco apparated into her flat, the Draco outside disappeared.

## Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the late update, I've had to write more of the back half of the story to make sure everything moves smoothly. Thanks your patience! I'm so excited to share more updates soon. Thank you for the kudos and comments and all the kindness!

I have a tiktok page under January Devine. I'm not great at tiktok yet, but if you want to follow me there, I'd really be grateful!

Alexa, play Do You Like That by Sleep Token.



## Chapter 22

Draco was losing his mind. He thought that once he'd slept with Hermione again, properly and not platonically, that he'd calm down, but it had the opposite effect. He wanted her constantly. He was a fiend and never satisfied. He knew if he stayed with her as much as he wished he'd smother her and ruin everything they'd been able to work through.

*She was his.* He had to remind himself constantly. Her reluctance to speak about their relationship would get better in time, he knew that, but he was still desperate to hear her say it. Draco held his tongue every time they made love, he wanted to tell her so many times how much he loved her, how deeply he cared for her, how he fucking worshiped her. But that had to wait, he knew logically it was too much, she was barely becoming comfortable with courting.

His phone buzzed with her name dancing on the screen. When she was in working mode she rarely called him.

“Darling?”

“Where are you?” Her voice had his pulse skipping, he stood up from his seat. Something was wrong.

“At the manor.” He said. “Are you alright?”

“He’s outside.” A cold tendril of terror snaked his spine. “You’re—“ He was already apperating away.

As soon as his feet were on the ground he was moving towards her, scanning her for injuries. She was still staring out of the window, eyes wide, jaw set.

“Darling.” He said, grabbing her shoulder. She jumped as he touched her and his heart sank, as he saw the fear that lined her face. She masked it quickly, leaning into his body.

“We should watch the footage.” She said, rushing the words, her voice hollow and weak. “I’m sure there is something we can gain from it. He was timing something. Probably how fast you’d arrive. He was testing for something as well. He kept tapping the wards, testing them. It was a test. Draco. It—” She was shaking slightly.

“Hermione.” Draco said slowly. “It’s okay. You’re safe.” He pulled away slightly, careful to move slowly. She was clearly upset from the encounter. He would kill them. He would kill them for making her shake, for making her scared, for using his face to scare her. If they turned her against him... fuck. He cut that thought off. His mind was racing, bordering on panic himself, but he needed to be steady for her.

“Come here.” He pulled her closer. “It’s okay. It’s okay.” He rubbed his hand over her hair.

"I'm fine." She whispered, pulling away from him and he tried not to take it personally. "I'm angry. I'm so angry, Draco." Her eyes were filled with tears, her bottom lip shaking. "They're going to pay for this. For taunting me and making me feel so...so..." She trailed off and he hated how helpless he felt at that moment.

"You should move in with me." He replied. "You should move into my flat and we won't tell anyone. That way if anyone tries to get through here, you're not here. That's what we are going to do. I'll have Pilly coordinate moving your things so no one sees anything and-"

"No." Hermione said, crossing her arms.

He furrowed his brow. "What do you mean no?"

"I mean no. I'm not moving into your flat." She snapped. "I'm not moving out of my home because some psycho is trying to scare me. If anything this demonstrates how well my wards are holding up."

"Hermione, this isn't the time to be stubborn. You're in clear danger. This person is-" His voice cracked, he swallowed and lowered his voice. "This person is going to turn you against me and I can't- I can't- I need you to be safe." He was about to say dangerous things. His heart was racing so fast. "You need to leave and be in a safer location. If not my flat, then the manor, for fucks's fake move in with Theo. The older homes have layers of blood wards that are practically impenetrable."

"No." She turned and walked away from him and Draco's jaw tightened. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe. Forcing himself not to throw her over his shoulder and take her to a remote location where no one would ever find her again. He had enough money and resources to do it and he wouldn't even feel guilty about it.

"We need to talk about this." He said, proud of himself for being mature and including her in the conversation. She didn't even have a clue how easily he could not give her a choice. In fact he didn't want her to have a choice if he was being honest. It was a sacrifice for him to give her one, but he wanted her to choose to be with him and that desire alone made him shut down any ideas of coercion.

"No." Hermione repeated as she walked to the kitchen. He followed her watching as she began to make tea, turning the burner on too high again.

"Hermione." He said, feeling the frustration building. "This is serious." His voice was hard and low.

"I'm taking it seriously." She said in a too calm voice. She was shoving all her feelings away. Draco had wondered if she knew she was halfway to occlumency with that skill alone, fuck she could be a natural occlumens and not even know it. She turned facing him, "I understand that this is scary and I'm sorry you're scared Draco. I don't like this either. You're more than welcome to tighten security measures around my home, but you're not in charge of where I live. I won't be moving. I will continue working, I'll keep living my life, and I'll-"

"No." He said, his voice cold as ice. "No you're not taking this seriously. If you think they were timing how quickly I could get here, do you know what that implies?"

"They want to kidnap me or something like that." She said flatly, crossing her arms. "I think all of the attacks have simply been tests. Tests to see what you'd do, what I'd do, and how they can respond to it. If I don't change my plans it means I have the upperhand, I'll know they're coming and when they come—"

"No!" He hissed, he didn't raise his voice, he didn't have to demonstrate how much he disagreed. "No you will not put yourself in harm's way. This is ludicrous. You're in danger and if you have any confidence in my intelligence or ability to do my job then you should take my advice seriously."

"Would Blaise say the same thing?" Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Should I call him and ask?"

Draco's jaw tightened. Her kettle whistled and she moved it off the burner, pouring the too hot water over her tea. He flexed his hands, before tightening them into fists. Kidnapping might just be a better fucking idea. He looked at the ceiling, wishing he believed in a god to pray to for patience.

"You are letting your feelings get in the way." She said softly. And it was that softness in her voice that made him even more frustrated. "If Blaise agrees with you, I'll hear him out, but I think you're overreacting. If fake Draco continues to come to my flat it gives us the opportunity to track him." She took her tea into the living room, passing by him. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. Let me know if you find anything useful on the security cameras."

"If you think I'm leaving you're seriously mistaken." He said, irritation coating every word. Maybe he was overreacting or maybe she was under-reacting, but he certainly wasn't leaving her here alone.

"Fine." She set her tea down on the coffee table that had hardly any space on it. "You can't hover. I don't want you reading over my shoulder, so don't sit nearby." He was silent for a long moment before he apparated to the manor, grabbed his things, and apparated back, he moved into the dining room and set his computer up. It took everything in him to not go into the living room and sit directly next to her and do the exact opposite of what she just told him to do.

He watched the security footage and sent it to Blaise. These fuckers were doing a good job scaring him, scaring Hermione, and making sure Harry couldn't do a damn thing in a legal way. What would they have to say? Draco Malfoy is stalking Hermione? *Fuck*. He hated this. He hated fighting with her. He took a call from Blaise and checked message boards. Ron's rumored Minister of Magic bid was creating a lot of buzz in the online spaces which confirmed a long held suspicion of his.

He waited an hour before checking on her, he peeked around the corner of the room. Her wand was stuck in her ponytail, a pen in her mouth, as she sat cross legged on the floor examining all the written notes she wrote over the typed papers she held. *He was so fucked.*

She was everything to him. He'd do anything for her, if she only knew the power she held over him. It was testament enough that he hadn't taken her away already. He cared deeply that she chose to be with him, he didn't want to force her, he wanted her to choose him. He wanted to hear her say the words that she was his.

She looked up and offered him a small smile. Fuck. All his resolve to approach the subject of her moving again melted away with a single look.

"What do you want for dinner?" He said instead of, '*You're moving out of here if I have to force you, I will.*' He mentally applauded himself for his control. He could do this. He could control himself.

"That Italian place we went to last week." She replied. He nodded and was about to turn around again, but her soft voice stopped him.

"Draco." she said, standing up. He never got tired of hearing his name on her lips. She approached him, grabbing his hand. "I don't want to fight."

"Neither do I." He said. He still vehemently disagreed with her, but he wouldn't press the issue right now. She stood on tiptoes, leaning into him, wrapping her arms around his waist, he met her halfway, pressing a kiss to her lips. "Will you consider canceling your future events?" He risked the only question that he knew Blaise would agree with.

"I'll think about it." She bit her lip. "I'm not trying to be reckless I promise."

"I know." He said. "You're just too damn brave for your own good. I wish you had a little more slytherin inside you. Self preservation would do you some good."

She quirked her brow. "Is that an innuendo?"

He gave her a faint smile, "It can be if you'd like." He wrapped his arms tighter around her and after a moment he said. "I need you to be safe." He pressed a long kiss onto her head, his mind couldn't stop racing that someone was trying to take her away from him. Punishing him. He'd just barely gotten her back. He'd barely been able to start enjoying her. "I just need you to be safe." He repeated, he would make sure he was safe and he'd die doing it.

"I know you said you're not watching movies out of the eighties yet, but there's a movie that I think you'd like with Whitney Houston in it. Would you be interested in it?" Hermione asked.

"Of course, I am." Draco said, forcing a smile onto his face.

Draco hated the movie. Was this her way of telling him they wouldn't end up together? Why would she show him a movie that was practically an identical situation to hers? Did she not see all the ways it mirrored her situation? Was he not a faux bodyguard?

"If they don't end up together I don't want to watch it." He said as the credits rolled. "How stupid they both are to not realize they are meant to be together."

"Not everything is a happy ending."

"Well I want a happy ending." Draco pouted, folding his arms. "Take a shower with me witch." He pulled her off the couch. He couldn't tell her he loved her, but he could make sure she felt loved with every touch and taste of her.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione reluctantly canceled the rest of her in person events, except the one at Hogwarts. Speaking to young muggle born witches and wizards gave her such pride in her work. Helping other students understand the gaps that muggleborns had to make also gave her purpose; she wished there had been more understanding for her. In the two days since the encounter with the fake Draco, the real Draco had not left her alone. He gave her space, but he didn't leave her alone. She understood how insulting it was for this person to use his likeness to scare her, it was scary to her too. But she still didn't want to change her patterns, she wanted to be predictable to lure them out. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense to her that, should they try to kidnap her, for whatever nefarious reason, she wanted to have the upper hand. She'd spent the last two days locked in her bedroom working during the day, forcing Draco into the living room, until she was ready for bed, where he picked her up and kissed her senseless. During her working hours she peered over the letters that had been sent to her over the last few years. Separating them into different types of letters, similar handwriting types, and looking for similar patterns in speech. Draco had rewatched the security footage a thousand times, and reinforced the wards just as many, and he hadn't brought up her moving out again which she was grateful for. The hardest part of this whole thing was how angry she was at herself for calling Draco and not marching outside and punching fake Draco in the face. She was angry that she froze and didn't do anything productive about the situation, but she would remedy that.

It's not that she was opposed to moving in with Draco, he practically lived with her as it was, but she didn't want moving in with him to be like this, under these circumstances. It felt too much like running away. It felt like admitting defeat. Even though she was afraid, she wouldn't back down, she couldn't.

As she walked into the large classroom full of kids waiting to hear from her, all her worries sank to the background of her mind, she focused on the feeling that speaking to these children gave to her. This is why she did what she did, this is what she was supposed to do

with her life. Educating and helping the wizarding world, giving back to her community, and leaving a legacy of goodness behind when she died, this is what motivated her.

McGonagall smiled brightly as she entered the room, “And here is our guest of honor, Hermione Granger.” Draco, Blaise, Harry, Theo, and Pansy stood in the back, along with several press and media people.

Hermione shook hands with each student and then sat in the front of the room, she decided to read the dedication from her book.

“Dear Reader,

Having guidance, support, and mentorship allows muggle born witches and wizards to gain a foothold in the incredibly life changing experience that is discovering one has magic. It is my hope that this book will guide you, protect you, and encourage you as you learn how to navigate the wizarding world, but my ultimate goal is for you to never feel lonely.”

Hermione’s voice cracked on the word. She swallowed, wiping the corner of her eyes. “I dedicate this book to every girl or boy who felt like they never really belonged fully in the muggle world or fully in the wizarding world. I want you to know you’re not alone, you not only deserve to be here, but you belong here. Your magic is real magic, not a sullied version, not a generic version, and not anything less than real, beautiful, and powerful. Let this book help you develop your skills, embrace your muggle side, and most importantly enjoy practicing magic.

With love, Hermione Granger”

The applause caused more tears to fall and there was a small continuous trickle of tears as each child came up to her. A fourth year girl who had also looked as if she had been crying said, “You have no idea what this book means to me. Thank you so much for writing it.” Hermione hugged the girl after signing her book.

Theo and Pansy coordinated several photos with the students and staff. Harry joined in a picture with Hermione and she could help the cry that came out then too. “Proud of you.” He squeezed her.

Half an hour later, the students left and Hermione was mingling with teachers. Theo and Pansy were trying to convince Hagrid to let them see Fluffy and the gentle giant was stumbling over his words pretending not to know what they were talking about. Harry was stuck speaking with Slughorn, who was still pitching the slug club. Draco stayed against the wall with Blaise, an unreadable expression on his face as he scanned the crowd.

A young boy rushed through the room. “Hermione!” Hermione turned towards him, he had to be a first year, he was so small. It happened so fast Hermione didn’t react, her body froze as the boy whipped his wand out and screamed, “Crucio!”

The room was a blur of motion, but it was Draco’s body that jumped in front of her, his body that was hit with the curse, his body twitching on the floor at her feet. Harry disarmed the boy quickly. Theo was on the floor next to Draco, Pansy next to Hermione. “Hermione. Hermione.” Pansy held her, Hermione was still as stone, her body numb and cold. Blaise was

sending the media out of the room and casting security wards. McGonagall gave instructions to the staff to check on the other students.

Hermione fell to her knees finally feeling something as her heart rattled in her chest.

“Draco.” Her voice was small and fragile. Her hands found his face. “Draco.” His breathing was uneven, his eyes clenched together as another brief spasm rolled through his body. Less than ten seconds of crucio and yet, she knew all too well how powerful and agonizing the pain was.

“I’m fine.” He gritted out.

“Don’t get up too soon, mate.” Theo said, his voice a serious tone he rarely used, a hand against Draco’s shoulder kept him from sitting up. Hermione’s thumbs rubbed against his cheekbones. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” She hissed, as tears fell from her eyes.

His eyes opened at that, “A lot actually.” He swallowed hard as his body twitched beneath her hands. She could feel the rolling electrical magic underneath his skin and her body tensed as if it were happening to her. The memories of being tortured never went away. He sat up slowly and her hands fell away from his face, but on his hands found hers, cupping her cheek. “Are you alright?”

“Oh gods you’re an idiot.” She huffed, throwing her arms around his neck, unrestrained tears falling down her face.

“Mudblood whore!” The boy screamed behind her. Hermione stiffened and then slowly turning to face him.

Harry had the boy restrained in a chair. “Sorry.” Harry said. “I had him silenced, but because he’s a minor I can’t silence him for too long, it’s against the law, without his parents around. It seems like he’s been under the imperius curse, but there isn’t a way to say definitively.”

“Who are his parents?” Pansy asked. “We should get them down here immediately.”

“I’ve notified them.” McGonagall stated. “His name is Connor Brady, he’s a muggle born wizard. His parents aren’t the most supportive of his time here, I’m afraid this won’t go over well with them. He’s a kind boy, I don’t know who would have done this.”

“I’m here to send a message.” Connor spat. “Your book is going to be the death of you.” His wild eyes were focused solely on Hermione. “If you continue shoving your nose where it doesn’t belong, you’re going to regret it mudblood. You don’t deserve to live!”

Hermione took a deep breath. “Why are you upset about my book?” She said, “Which part is bothersome?”

“You know exactly which parts. You’ve been warned again and again and yet you keep digging into places that don’t concern you. Stay away from Azkaban!” The boy yelled.

“Connor.” Hermione said, reaching for him. “Connor, listen to my voice. You have to fight against whoever is in your mind. You must fight against it. I know it’s scary, but you must

try.”

Connor jerked against the chair.

“No one cares what you think you filthy mudblood. Don’t touch me with your slimy mudblood germs. You have dirty blood. You have dirty magic. You’re filth. You’re disgusting.” He kept repeating nasty remarks over and over.

“Connor, fight against it. Find something to ground yourself in a safe place of some sort. Imagine a rope in your mind and tug on it. Grab hold of it and climb out of the dark hole you’re in. Each step you take will help you gain more control of your thoughts. Keep-”

Connor sniffed. “Do you all smell that? Your putrid mudblood smell is making this place unbearable.” He gagged.

Hermione sighed. “Connor do you realize you’re also muggle born?”

“Don’t remind me. I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!” He screamed. “Burn me alive will you? I’m teased, I’m bullied, I’m alone in the library all the time.” He was crying now. “It’ll be a better place when I’m dead too. We all deserve to die, lest we be saved by the hands of those that are pure of blood.” His eyes went to Draco. “Purity will always conquer!” The boy held a heart-wrenching mixture of tears and a manic smile across his face.

Hermione felt the tears fall against her cheeks. “You deserve to live, Connor. You are good and still have so much left to learn about magic. I promise you it will get better.”

“I don’t believe a single thing you say, you’re a disgrace, making mudblood students feel special, we need pureblood wizards to show us how to live properly, show us our place in the world.”

“Keep fighting Connor, keep fighting against the dark magic that’s inside you.” Hermione turned to Harry. “You should keep reminding him to fight it. Or better yet take him to Gringotts and wash it away under the thief’s downfall.”

Aurors arrived at the castle, interviewing each of them about what occurred. McLaggen pulled Hermione aside, much to Draco’s obvious irritation, and casted a silencing charm to take her statement. He didn’t offer her his usual winks, he seemed to be extra disturbed about a child being placed under such a horrific curse. An unforgivable done on anyone was appalling, but a child was unusually cruel. “And you’re certain Malfoy has nothing to do with this?” He said after writing down her statement.

Hermione furrowed her brow. “He saved me from enduring the torture, Cormac.”

“Seems awfully convenient. It’s nearly impossible to trace who casts an imperius curse and Malfoy is an excellent occlumens. Just don’t want you to put your trust in the wrong places.” He shrugged.

“Now you sound like Ron.” She rolled her eyes. “Speaking of, is he planning to announce his candidacy on Saturday?”

"I still have not heard a confirmation either way, he's being extra cautious of what he says, but he will be at the gala." Cormac glanced at Draco who stood a few paces away, arms crossed against his chest. He hadn't stopped watching their silent conversation for a single second. "He's scary." He said.

"Yeah, he is, that's why I like him." Hermione said. "Don't get distracted, I'm about to submit paperwork for a request on the financial records on Askaban, make certain they get through."

"You really think it's smart to do that so soon after," He gestured to the room.

"I think they're scared and if they're willing to start using children for their dirty work, it's more important than ever to keep pushing ahead. Are you backing out?" Hermione asked. "If you are you'll need to tell me immediately so I can also tell-"

"I'm not backing out." Cormac replied. "Simply making sure we're on the same page. Does your bodyguard know?" He nodded towards Draco.

"No and he doesn't need to know yet." Hermione said.

"Be safe Granger." Cormac said as he reversed the silencing spell.

Draco was unusually quiet as they left the castle and he was unnervingly quiet when they were back at her flat. After she changed her clothes, he was sitting on the couch, still brooding, his mask of coldness didn't fool her, he was simply waiting to bring it up again.

"I'm not moving and I'm not going to stop writing my book." She stated standing in front of him.

His grey eyes were a raging storm. "I know." He gritted out. "And I'm trying to figure out how to still keep you alive while you do it."

"Everything that has happened is a test, Draco. They're scared of what I'm digging up and now they're using children as foot soldiers. I'm not going to stop, because every time I spoke to Connor, I could see myself sitting there."

His jaw tensed and his eyes fell away from hers. "His message was as much for you as it was for me."

She sat next to him him. "What do you mean?"

"Don't do that." He said. "Don't act like you didn't notice the similarities of how he spoke to you. It's like he was quoting me." His voice held a depressing sadness. "Reminding the both of us how I used to speak to you."

Hermione had noticed, but didn't consider how it would impact Draco. "I'm sorry." She replied. His head whipped towards her. "What do you have to be sorry about?"

"For everything that happened today. You were hurt because of me, you heard those words again, I'm sure it was all very hard for you."

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat." He responded.

"Well you shouldn't. You don't deserve to be hurt over something that is entirely my fault." Hermione said, distraught at the memory of Draco suffering at her feet.

"What is hard for me is you insisting that you have to do things that put you in danger, I'm not asking you to give up, I'm just trying to get you to be safer. This flat is not safe enough. Even with the runic stones it's only a matter of time before they can get through the wards. It's only a matter of time before—"

"And we can be ready for them. We can have a plan and work together. We can figure this out together—"

"And by we, do you mean you and your buddy McLaggen? What was so important that he had to silence your conversation?" Draco's lip curled.

"Oh gods, Draco now is not the time for you to be jealous. I'm with you aren't I? I publicly announced that we are courting, is that not enough for you?"

"Say it." He said. "Say your mine." Hermione swallowed, caught off by the sudden desperate command, her hesitation and him letting out a disappointed huff of breath. "I'm not questioning your loyalty Hermione, I can see very clearly though that you don't trust me. What are you working on that is making everyone upset? What is happening in Azkaban that is so worthy of your attention?"

"I'll tell you when you tell me what's so special about your message boards." She jutted her chin in the air. "Or how you and Harry became such close friends over the last year. You don't trust me either Draco, or else you'd say a lot more. You're withholding things too."

They held each other's stare.

Draco turned away first, saying the words slowly as he spoke. "Maybe you should take a break from the book on Askaban." Hermione shot out her seat, her hands going into her hair. "I'm not saying forever, but just until we can figure out what is happening with all of this. You are in more danger than anyone realized." Draco said, watching her pace.

"Now you sound like Ron!" Hermione yelled. "You cannot be serious. You said you'd help me. You said if I told you it was worth my time, you'd help me."

"Yeah, well I didn't realize I'd have to consider killing a child." He said, the words cold and low. Hermione stopped in her tracks. "Please tell me you'd never do that."

"I wouldn't." He stood. "And I didn't, but I won't lie and tell you I didn't consider it for a moment. There's the truth for you. He could have killed you! He could have used a killing curse just as easily as a torture curse, whoever is controlling his mind could have done anything!" Draco ran a hand through his hair. "And, please don't fucking compare me to

Weasley. From the very little you've told me and the things Potter has been willing to divulge that bastard treated you like shit and for all we know he's part of this whole fucking thing."

"You don't think I've considered that? Why do you think I've been friends with him for so long? Why do you think I ignore half of the horrible things he's said to me? Something is clearly going on with him, but Ron's not capable of organizing this level of criminal behavior." Hermione said. "This is bigger than him!"

"How do you know that?" Draco said, stepping towards her. "How do you know what he's capable of?"

Hermione let out a frustrated breath. "I don't. Okay, truly I don't know what he's doing and the ministry rumor is making me question a lot of his motives, but there are more people involved in this and they're targeting me, maybe I'm just a distraction or maybe it is a punishment for my book, I don't know. I also don't know why they're bringing you into this, and I'm also not sure if those pictures of us are still connected or just a strange coincidence. I hate not knowing things, but I do know I'm close to figuring it all out. It's all connected somehow. And I need you on my side, I can't fight you and everything else that's going on, but if you insist on fighting me I will." She looked up at him and his face had gone blank, his eyes distant. "Stop doing that." Hermione snapped, pacing away from him. "Stop occluding every damn time we start having a real conversation."

"I can't be honest with you Hermione, not without you running away from me. And I can't relieve you running away from me like you're scared of me again."

"I'm not scared of you. I just think there is a lot we haven't talked about." She wrung her hands together. Fuck she didn't know if she could handle this right now. "The letter from Askaban for example."

"We don't need to talk about that." He said quietly, dropping his gaze to his hands. "Please. I don't want to talk about that. Not now."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Of course not." She grabbed her bag and slammed the door to her room.

Today was hard for both of them and it reminded both of them how much Draco had hated her. His words in that letter replayed unwillingly in her mind over and over while she filled out the paperwork to access the financial reports of Azkaban. When she finally left her room to send them via owl service, Draco was working on the couch, he placed his laptop down as she approached.

"I ordered dinner." He said, waving to the bags of food on the table. She sat by him, she hated fighting with him just as much as she was scared that he still hated her. He turned to her, his eyes full of emotions she didn't know how to read, except the the obvious crestfallen sound of his voice. "Hermione." It was a rough plea and it broke her heart she couldn't give him what he wanted. There were so many things he wanted from her that she didn't know how to give to him. So she kissed him instead. He immediately pulled her on top of his lap so

that she was straddling him. He kissed her with such intensity she couldn't breathe, whatever he offered she gave back with equal measure, they apparently couldn't talk, but they could communicate in other ways. Other ways that might be safer than the truth.

Her shirt came off and then his.

She ran her hands up his torso. "Draco." She whispered against his mouth.

She lifted up as he tugged off her pants, his buckle snapped open and she shoved his trousers down just enough to access him.

"Hermione." He rasped as she sank onto his cock. One of his hands pressed down on her lower back, one threaded tightly through her hair. He pulled her head back, licking up the curve of her neck.

"Draco." She said in a breathy moan.

She rocked against him, riding him and chasing the overwhelming pleasure that was building inside her. Every cell in her body was chanting his name.

The name that they'd sung ever since that letter arrived, for better or for worse, in all her horrible and shameful ways throughout the years she thought about him, his name was never far from her thoughts. It was so incredibly vulnerable to admit, she was close to crying right then, just letting the confession slip to herself.

He pulled her closer, a guttural plea into her ear. "Hermione."

She let out a shuddering moan as she came, listening to his groaning pleasure, feeling his body tighten beneath her, lengthened her own orgasm and sent secondary waves of pleasure through her. They held each other, breathing hard, she kissed his neck and his cheeks and then his lips. "Draco." She whispered.

She kissed again before pulling away from him and using the bathroom.

"Oh fuck." She said angrily.

"Are you alright?" he said from the living room, she had left the door open. Her level of comfort around him was at an all time high apparently. She finished up and walked into the room, he had moved to the dining room table, she joined him, reaching for the chinese food he'd ordered.

"I'm fine, I just started my period." She sighed. "Another annoyance to deal with." She gave him a half smile.

His brows knitted together as he stared at her, the expression making her stomach tighten uneasily. "I'm sorry." He replied. "I can't imagine how it feels to go through that every month." His phone buzzed and he answered quickly. Hermione could vaguely hear Blaise's voice on the other end.

"Alright." Draco said, while hanging up. She could hear the reluctance in his voice.

“Apparently I’ve been spotted in Switzerland trying to buy another runic stone.” His jaw was tight. “Blaise wants us to leave tonight.”

“You should.” Hermione said. “This is a good thing, we need to apprehend them somehow.”

“I’m sorry.” He repeated, as he stood from the table. “I’ll have Pilly send over some potions to help with your cramps, I’ll send a masseuse too. And have food sent over from the restaurant daily.”

“That’s dramatic. I’m capable of doing that on my own.” She stood from the table.

“Is there anything I’m allowed to do for you or will you reject all of the ways I try to take care of you?” He said, brushing his knuckles against her cheek, his eyes still holding a thread of sadness.

Hermione shifted on her feet. “Fine. Do what you wish.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips. “I’ll call you when I know more.”

The next day the news outlets reported on Hermione’s time at Hogwarts.

*Another Muggle Born Gone Mad: How Can the Wizarding World Protect Itself From Unstable Magic?*

*Hermione Granger Creating Army of Muggleborn Extremists*

*Should Muggle Born Wizards and Witches Be Given Special Treatment? How Hermione Granger Wants to Take Away the Rights of Pureblood Wizards*

Hermione cried with every new headline. Not in fear, but in blazing hot anger. There was only one way this would end and it wasn’t with muggle borns being blamed for taking anything away from others. No, the only way this would end is with Hermione hunting down every single person involved in terrorizing her. They had no idea who they were dealing with.



# Chapter 23

## Chapter Notes

Please see the end notes for a trigger warning. I'm placing it at the bottom to help avoid spoilers.

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

Hermione was dressed in one of the new dresses Draco had bribed her with. It was a silky, floor length black dress and she had to admit it felt made for her body. It draped over her like a the midnight sky. She sent him a picture before floo-ing to the gala.

*My beautiful, perfect girl, I miss you like crazy. Will you wear that for me when I get back?*

Hermione could tell he was not thrilled when she told him she was going to the gala, but she would be going with or without his approval. A fact he also seemed to know and instead of arguing he talked her through a list of protection spells to use on herself, which was progress.

Draco also knew Harry would be coming with her and it seemed to ease his worry, at least she hoped it did. He had been gone for four days and with each passing day she wished he'd come back. With as much as they disagreed on her security measures, she missed him like crazy too. Blaise and Draco had been following the fake Draco through Switzerland, every time the imposter evaded them when they go too close, all for him to pop up in a different part of the country. They weren't entirely sure what he was doing, but he was showing himself more often than ever before so they stayed.

The gala was held at a beautiful old house in the English countryside. It was a St. Mungo's fundraiser where Ron and The Brotherhood had donated a large sum of galleons that enabled them to have their names on all the invitations and program materials.

"Regardless of whatever Draco has said to you, you don't need to hover, Harry." She said to him as they entered the party. They quickly found their name tags on a table and Hermione glanced around the room. It was packed with people, the large dance floor filled with mingling guests, tables surrounding the perimeter. Almost all of high society wizarding London was here.

"He's just worried about you. We all are," Harry replied. "Don't be too hard on him."

"Look at you sticking up for Draco Malfoy." Hermione chuckled. "What made you two close anyway? How did you two build such a close bond?" Harry rolled his eyes.

"I'll let him tell you about that." Harry dusted off his suit jacket, "Did Theo or Pansy say they were coming?"

"Theo said he might come later, another party caught his eye, but Pansy isn't coming." Hermione said, setting her purse down. Ron was across the dance floor laughing with a drink in his hand. *What are you up to Ronald?*

"Well, shall we go mingle?" Harry offered her his arm again.

"Yes, separately," Hermione said, turning around, walking in the opposite direction. She spoke with several former professors and a few literary friends before Ron walked up to her.

"Hermione." He said, his eyes dragging down her dress. "You look very nice."

"Thank you." She smiled, politely. Ron's words the last time they spoke replayed in her mind. She forced her face to remain soft and neutral. "This is a great event."

"It is." He said, staring at her in a way that made her shift on her feet.

"Where's Daphne?" She asked.

"She's around here somewhere." He didn't take his eyes off of her. "I want you to know Hermione, that you've inspired me. When I give my speech later, I want you to remember that you inspired it." He smiled wide, "Give Malfoy my regards." He moved away from her and a shiver ran down her spine.

Dinner was served shortly after. "I saw you speaking with Ron. Everything alright?" Harry asked as he cut his chicken.

"Yes, everything's fine. He didn't say much, it was just..creepy." Hermione shrugged. When dinner was finished and they all were served dessert and champagne, Ron was brought to the stage. Hermione's stomach tightened in anticipation at the inspiration she gave him. Would he call her a whore publicly? Berate Draco?

"Hello and thank you for being here." He waved to the crowd. "It's my genuine pleasure and joy to announce that The Brotherhood and I have worked together to donate over fifty thousand galleons to St. Mungos." A loud round of applause erupted from the room.

"It was Merlin himself that said, 'Abandoning ancient magic will be the downfall of the wizarding world.' What I believe The Brotherhood and I do so well together is we ground ourselves in our roots. Those ancient roots like Merlin gave us, and those powerful wizards that followed him. Those that created the wizarding world we know today. Honoring the past and building a future with community in mind is the ancient wisdom that still holds true in The Brotherhood. That's why I'm so passionate about building up the wizards of our community, to give them the opportunity to turn today's opportunities into tomorrow's legacies."

Harry and her exchanged glances of surprise. Hermione couldn't believe how well spoken Ron was. He was every bit the politician at that moment, saying a lot of words and yet nothing specific.

"It is that reason that I announce today with great honor that I officially declare my candidacy for minister of magic in the upcoming vote." A thunderous applause erupted again, along with loud whistling, and a faint chant of *Tutela Hereditatis*.

"It is a little unusual to announce such things at a party like tonight, but as my gorgeous fiance planned the party, it felt like the perfect place to share my heart and my future goals for the wizarding community. As most of you know, the first two friends I made at Hogwarts were raised by muggles." Hermione grabbed Harry's arm under the table. *What the fuck.* Ron looked their way with a smile. "They weren't used to many parts of the wizarding world and I did my best to show them the ropes."

A small laugh swirled through the room.

"But even with all the guidance I could offer as a child, there are many gaps in education for them and it's tough to learn those things on your own without proper support. With how society treats muggle borns, it's up to those who are from pureblood families like myself to give back to our community, it is a responsibility to our legacy to give to those who need help. And if you have seen any of the recent headlines, muggleborns need our help."

Another laugh rippled through the crowd and it felt like Hermione was the only one who didn't get the joke. "Hermione Granger, in her book about muggle borns said, "Muggle born children require extra attention, especially during their first year as wizards, it is the hardest year of their life. They go through an enormous amount of change in such a little amount of time. It would benefit all of wizarding kind to guide muggleborns so that they can create a place in the wizarding world where they feel like they belong." End quote. It is muggleborn safety that I'm prioritizing in my campaign, where each muggle born witch or wizard will be paired with a pureblood family. They'll be given a family that will sponsor their education, their well-being, and shape their futures together. That is what we already do at The Brotherhood, we help shape young men into future leaders and that's what we want to do for those disadvantaged like muggle borns, those witches and wizards who need help finding their place in the wizarding community. I will help them find their place, give them mentorship, and help them understand what their role is in the wizarding world. We are going to take today's problems and create the solution. We are going to take today's concerns and create safety. We are going to take today's opportunities and create tomorrow's legacies. Please join me in making the wizarding world a great place for everyone and vote Ronald Weasley for Minister of Magic." Ron held his glass up and the whole room erupted in a vigorous applause, toasting in unison.

Hermione's mind was spinning with questions, trying to piece together what he was saying out loud, what he wasn't saying out loud, and what he was implying. Daphne came on stage, followed by her parents and Ron's parents. They all waved to the crowd and Hermione's stomach soured.

"Muggle born's sponsored by pureblood families?" Harry repeated. "I think you mentioned a mentorship program years ago, where young wizards and witches could be paired with a mentor of some kind, right? Isn't that really similar to your idea?"

Hermione watched Ron as they took photos and shook hands, he met her eye and winked. Perhaps she had been underestimating his strategy skills. "Yes. I did say something very

similar, but not exactly in those words. Do you remember what Ron said when I shared the idea?"

"That it was unrealistic and would cost too much money." Harry replied. "I always assumed he was just lazy, but maybe Ron's been working harder than we realized."

"I agree. Let's stay and observe what he does now. Molly has already shot me a glare. I'm sure Ron's version of our breakup has the whole Weasely family on his side." Hermione said.

"Except Ginny. There is no way she can't see through this, right? Has Pansy said anything?"

"Pansy said they've only hung out once, because of her quidditch schedule. Ginny's coming to Theo's dinner party tomorrow evening though."

"And Malfoy? Zabini?" Harry asked.

"I think they'll be back too. I'm not sure, Draco is getting frustrated." Hermione kept her eye on Ron as he moved into the crowd with Daphne, leading her onto the dance floor. They began the first dance and more couples followed. Soon the dance floor was packed again.

"Let's dance," Harry said, standing from the table. Hermione frowned.

"We need to play it cool. If we are seen here pouting they'll write a whole article about your jealousy and my good looks." Harry offered his hand. "You know it's true."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine." They danced with plastered smiles on their faces. Hermione lost sight of Ron, but saw Anthony Goldstein who gave her a long raking look over her body even while dancing with Susan Bones. Susan looked at Hermione once and promptly turned away. Marcus Flint was on the dance floor with Astoria Greengrass neither of which bothered to hold back a condescending glare.

"I thought Astoria was living in Italy?" Harry said.

"Me too." Hermione said. When their song ended McLaggen came up to Hermione and moved them away from Harry, deeper into the crowded floor.

"Look how much you inspired him," McLaggen said, they began to dance as the song began.

"Do you have anything useful to share?" Hermione replied.

"Not at the moment," he said. "He encouraged me to dance with you."

"That's strange," Hermione said.

"He wants more information before I can fully initiate," he replied. "Got any more secrets to share?"

"Yes, but I'm uncertain if now is the right time to share it," Hermione sighed. "Try telling him I'll be visiting Azkaban soon."

"The Brotherhood is already aware," he said. "Did the imperiused child not send that message clearly?"

"Do you have proof that it was them?" Hermione hissed. "Don't make accusations you can't back up. Right now I have very circumstantial coincidences, nothing concrete. I need a paper trail, I need something I can prove."

"You know that's not how they operate," He said, rolling his eyes. "Isn't your bodyguard an expert in this sort of thing? Why isn't even helping you?"

"He's busy," Hermione replied.

Cormac lifted a brow, "You don't trust him."

"It's not about trust, it's about safety," Hermione replied.

"Speak of the devil." Cormac's eyes moved behind Hermione. "That's my sign to leave." The song ended and Draco's hand moved to Hermione's back. Her heart lept at the sight of him, but as the smile spread across his face, her heart sank like an iron anchor, slamming right through her.

"Hello," he smiled. "Why don't you dance with me properly?" He pulled her tightly against him and Hermione's body went rigid.

"You're not even going to try to convince me?" Hermione asked, quietly.

"What's the point? You seem to figure it out very quickly, I can tell by the look on your face," he replied.

"It's obvious you're not him," Hermione said, lip curling. "Besides the fact that he's in Switzerland."

"How can you be so sure?" The Draco in front of her smiled sinisterly. Her heart beat erratically in her chest, making it hard to breathe.

Hermione's hand twitched as his hand moved lower on her back.

He glancing at her hand. "If you try to grab your wand, I'll kill Connor."

Hermione inhaled sharply. "Harry took him to Gringotts. His imperius curse is gone."

"How can you be so sure it was an imperius curse?" The man lifted an eyebrow. "If you try to harm me in any way, the boy is dead. If you follow me, the boy is dead. If you so much as make a distressing sound, the boy is dead. The only thing you're allowed to do is look at me like you look at him."

"And how do I look at him?" Hermione's voice shook.

He hissed as he spoke, “Like he doesn’t hate you. Like he didn’t torment you for years. Like he isn’t a vile person. Almost like you love him.”

“He isn’t vile. He’s far from it,” Hermione said.

Draco smiled again, wide and all wrong. His eyes narrowed on her. “You don’t seem so sure about that.”

“What do you want from me?” Hermione asked through gritted teeth.

“You already know what I want. I want you to stop writing your book and stay away from Askaban, but we both know you’re not going to do that, I just wanted to give you the option, so that when you’re begging me for mercy, I can remind you I already tried to give it to you.” His face became lined with harsh anger, “When the time comes, you will have to choose. It’s you or him, Hermione. I’ll keep you and kill him or I’ll kill both of you. I know which one I prefer.” His hand moved to her ass, squeezing tightly before moving up her back. “But if you want to fight, that’s fine. We can fight.” Hermione’s back teeth clenched, she forced herself to breathe through her disgust.

“Why?” She breathed out, “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I can and I want to,” He arched his brow, “And it’s about time I get what I want.” The song ended and the fake Draco let her go slowly, “See you around.”

Hermione stood frozen in place for several long moments until a couple bumped into her.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

She moved through the crowd, trying to get off the dance floor. It was so crowded and couldn’t breathe. She wanted Draco, the real one. She wanted him to hold her and to anchor her into reality. She escaped to her table with an audible gasp, grabbing an unopened bottle of champagne from a waiter and drinking straight from the bottle. A camera flashed in her direction. “What are you doing?” She snapped.

Justin Finch-Fletchley clicked his camera again and said, “Ron hired me after your boyfriend got me fired. He takes care of muggleborns and these will sell for a great price.” He smiled and walked away.

Hermione closed her eyes, forcing herself to breathe. She needed to find Harry and leave, but instead she grabbed her phone and went into the bathroom.

“Darling?” Draco said, she clenched her eyes shut, forcing herself not to cry.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Is everything okay?” He said, carefully.

“Yeah,” she replied. “I just wanted to check in. How are things going? Have you seen him recently?” She forced herself to sound calm.

"We just watched him walk into a museum, it's after hours and he has a private security detail," he replied. "He's been in there half an hour. All he's done is meet with museums and talk to wizards with Runic stones, he's made no offers."

"I miss you," she blurted. "When will you come home?"

"We're leaving after this," Draco said. "I'll be home soon."

"Good," she replied. "That's good." She was starting to tremble. She needed to be brave, she needed to fight.

"How is the gala? Are you still there?" He asked. She knew he placed a tracking spell on her, he knew that she knew that. The question was for her to simply share honestly with him.

"I'm still here, but I plan to leave soon," she replied. "I'll tell you everything when you get home. I'm tired." She pinched the bridge of her nose.

He was silent for a long moment. "Okay. Text me when you get home."

"I will." She replied.

Hermione found Harry shortly afterwards and left the gala.

"Are you alright?" He looked at her skeptically as she placed her bag down on her coffee table in her flat.

"The whole night was overwhelming. I don't know what Ron's doing, but he's playing a dangerous game. I'm just tired," she replied, then asked. "Where is Connor Brady at?"

Harry rubbed the back of her neck, "His parents took him home early after everything that happened. They couldn't do much after Gringotts, they didn't want him to stay, but are considering letting him return in January after the holiday break."

"And you set up wards for them?"

"Yeah, the few we are allowed to do without their permission."

"Good." Hermione nodded. "That's good." She needed to sleep, she needed to not think.

"We are going to figure this out, Hermione." Harry gave her a quick hug and floo'd home.

Hermione took a long shower, scourgifying her skin three times in between washing herself. The lingering squeeze of the imposter's hand was embedded into her skin like festering splinters. She had to tell Draco, but she didn't want to do it over the phone. There was nothing she would have done differently. She wouldn't risk Connor's life. After her shower, she reached for the dreamless sleep potion for the first time in years and downed the bottle.

Hermione was dreaming of his silky blonde hair between her legs, the same recurring dream she had every night since he'd been gone. Her hips were rocking slowly over his face.

He was licking her so well.

*So good.* It was so so so good.

He was so gentle. *So sweet.*

It was cruel how well her mind could recreate his touch perfectly. His mouth sucked slowly and rolled his tongue against her clit. *Oh my gods.*

There was a building, winding pressure that had started so slowly and had been building for so long she wondered how long she'd been dreaming. He'd been licking her for a long time now. Her fingers tightened in his hair and Draco moaned, it vibrated through up to her chest. She arched her back in response. Her aching nipples rubbing against his black t-shirt she'd been wearing while he'd been gone.

His fingers kneaded into her thighs, pulling her tighter against his mouth. She couldn't breathe, this was too much. She was panting hard as awareness grew in her body. As she began to hear his moans. He was lapping her up like she was his personal lolly. *His favorite lolly.*

She finally found the sense to open her eyes and when she locked onto his heated silver eyes she came undone. Her orgasm ripped through her roughly. She pressed hard against his face as he sucked harder in response. The jagged waves of pleasure rushed through her like a damn breaking. He kept licking steadily through it all and didn't stop until she had completely stopped moving. He kissed her clit. And then her hip bones, then stomach. His head went under the large black shirt and kissed his way up along the sensitive underside of her breast he sucked on her nipples.

"You're back." She panted out and slung her arm across his shoulders, his *bare* shoulders. "Are you naked?" She breathed harder. He hadn't stopped kissing her breasts. He licked across a nipple. "I missed you," he said underneath her shirt.

She pulled the shirt off of his head and pulled his head off her breast with a sucking pop. "Yes, I'm back and I'm naked." He said panting.

She pulled him up to her, capturing his mouth. He moved on top of her, grabbing her wrists in each of his hands, he slowly laid against her body and she felt like her body was made of light. Everything felt so sensitive and warm. He had her pinned against the bed and she reveled in the heavy weight of him against her.

She kissed him slowly, mimicking the way he had kissed her cunt. His cock pressed hard into her hips.

"How much did you miss me?" She asked.

“A normal, healthy, appropriate amount.” He said from above her, smirking. His hands loosened around her wrists as he moved against her, aligning himself to her entrance.

“I missed you too,” she said, sucking in a breath as his head pressed barely inside her, then pulled back out, then just barely inside once again.

“Fuck.” She whimpered, as he pushed in one slow motion, deeper and deeper. His hands slid down her arms and against her palms, intertwining their fingers together.

“And how much did you miss me?” He said into her neck, pressing small delicate kisses against her shoulder and collar bone.

“A very normal, healthy, appropriate amount as well,” She replied and he chuckled against her skin which made her smile.

“Look at me.” She whispered. He slowly trailed his nose against her jawline, against her lips, finally bringing his gaze to hers. Their eyes locked in an intense moment that seemed to crackle the air between them. She couldn’t look away. She wanted to stare at him like this forever.

Maybe that’s why it was so hard to look at him sometimes. When would that look disappear?

He rolled his hips slowly, thrusting deep inside her. He let go of her hands, threading one through her hair, the other pulling her around the waist. Running down the side of her body, gripping her bum. He touched her in all the right ways. She wrapped her leg around his waist, while staring into the endless depths of silver that were his eyes. Rolling along with his movements, every one feeling better than the last. She licked his lip and he licked her back, she held onto him, wishing to be as close as possible.

She whimpered, pressing her forehead into his as a wave of pleasure swelled inside her.

“You feel so good,” she said “It feels impossibly good, like-“ she didn’t have words.

“I know,” he said against her mouth. Their mouths hung open against the others as their bodies rolled together. Moving in a perfect rhythm. “I missed you so much,” he moaned, as her nails dragged down his back. “A completely,” he kissed the corner of her mouth, “Normal amount.”

“I thought about you a lot,” she confessed. “But still a normal amount.” She captured his mouth and they both rolled to the side, legs intertwining and their arms wrapping around each other. They kissed for so long her lungs burned. Draco licked against her tongue and she felt her core flutter in response. “Keep doing that.” He did, in perfect rhythm with his hip thrusts pressing into her in controlled short motions, his hand that was woven into her hair, pressed her closer.

“You’re perfect,” he panted. “So perfect.” She began whimpering as her orgasm began to build in earnest.

“Draco.” She whined.

“I know,” he kissed her softly. “I know.”

“You feel so good,” she moaned, barely able to speak. *He* was perfect.

“You’re doing such a good job, keep going, love.”

His voice was deep and gently coaxing. It soothed her resistance and eased her into the pleasure she sought.

He kept talking to her. Praising her. “You’re so beautiful, you have no idea how much I adore you. You’re doing so good.” He kissed her, then spoke directly on her lips. “You’re such a good girl, Hermione. You don’t even know how good you are. You’re my good girl aren’t you?” He moved to her ear, in a ragged whisper. “You’re my good girl.” He repeated slowly, roughly. “You’re my good girl.” He repeated it again. And again. Again. “You’re my good girl.”

Each time was more demanding than the last. “You’re my good girl.”

“You’re my-“.

Hermione gasped as he kissed her neck.

“You’re mine. You’re mine. You’re mine.” He spoke into her skin and she felt like she could burst apart with the intensity of it all. “You’re mine, baby all mine.” She could feel him come as her orgasm hit her. She kissed him hard. Sucking his lip, pulling his hair. He kissed her just as possessively as they rode the waves of pleasure together.

They kept kissing lazily as they came down from the ecstasy and when he pulled out of her, they stared at each other for a long moment. His nose brushed hers and she swallowed the words she wanted to say. The things she wanted to ask. It wasn’t until he brushed her face that she realized she was crying.

“Are you alright? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m okay,” she said, her voice unconvincing. “Just feeling overwhelmed I think.”

He stared at her, “Swear to me I didn’t hurt you.” He continued brushing his thumb at the corners of her eyes, wiping stray tears away.

She inhaled slowly trying to regain control of herself. They’d just had this incredible time together and she was ruining it. “I swear.” She whispered, running her fingers against his jaw. “I just...”

“What, what is it?”

She suddenly felt incredibly, irrationally shy. She wanted to hide. She closed her eyes. “It was just intense.”

“Tell me what to do so I can make it better for you next time.”

She opened her eyes flabbergasted, “That’s not what I meant.” She let out a small laugh in disbelief. “You are a great lover Draco. So good I wonder if I’ve ever had proper sex before you. No wonder Daphne is so jealous. Being with you is...” Hermione finally looked at him. “Intense. Addictive. Different than anything I’ve ever experienced.”

“Hermione.” He pulled her hand up. Kissing her finger tips. “It’s not like this with anyone else. It’s never been like this before. Intense is accurate, addictive is an understatement, but referring to me,” He pulled her on top of him rolling onto his back. “As your lover is my new favorite thing I’ve ever heard.” He cupped her face, “Nothing compares to you. Nothing.”

She wasn’t sure how much he believed him. She wanted to, but it was hard considering everything else they haven’t discussed. She laid down on his chest as the emotional toll of everything hit her and she drifted to sleep as she listened to his heartbeat, wondering if making love to Draco Malfoy was something she could ever recover from.

Hermione woke up in a panic. Her heart beat so hard in her chest, it tightened to the point of pain. She felt unsteady and exposed, like she had just sprinted naked through the great hall and everyone was laughing at her. *She needed to run away. She needed to be safe.* She jumped out of bed and grabbed her wand. Draco was moving slowly, rubbing his eyes, yawning. *Draco wasn’t supposed to be here. He was in Switzerland.*

Fuck. She was naked. *Accio shirt.*

*Draco wasn’t supposed to be here. He was in Switzerland.*

Raw terror wracked her body. She started shaking as she muttered again, “*Accio wand.*”

She held both of their wands. That’s when she saw the gun on the nightstand. The Draco in her bed, sat up. “*Accio gun.*” She whispered.

She held the gun and aimed it at him. She’d never held a gun before and the cold, hard metal felt harsh against her clammy skin.

Draco stilled. “Hermione.” He watched her carefully. “What’s wrong?”

“How are you here?” She was having a hard time breathing, her vision blurred. *Draco wasn’t supposed to be here. He was in Switzerland.*

“Hermione, the gun is unloaded. There is no use in holding it. Put it down.”

“No,” she cried. “How do I know it’s you? You’re supposed to be in Switzerland!”

Draco slid slowly off the bed and Hermione stepped backwards aiming the gun and both of the wands at him.

“Don’t move any closer.” She was shaking, uncontrollably.

"Okay." He said, his eyes widening. "I won't move. Can I put clothes on? I think it would be more comfortable for you."

She waved his wand and his undergarments flew into his face, he put them on quickly, his eyes staying on her the entire time. She didn't have a plan. The fear pulsed through her body like a race horse, pushing her to run, run, run.

She didn't want to feel this way. What was wrong with her? Something was wrong.

"Tell me something that only you would know," she cried. She wanted...she didn't know what she wanted. Draco stood and she didn't move, he moved a little closer and she just kept crying, shaking as she held her weapons at him. He walked until the wands and gun were pointed into his chest.

"If you want to kill me, Hermione, I'd let you," he said quietly. "I think you're experiencing a panic attack right now."

"Answer me," she begged. "Please." She was so confused and overwhelmed, too many feelings raced through her. She was making love to him. She couldn't love him, it was impossible. Ridiculous. Insane.

"I have nightmares about what Beatrix did to you," Draco said, in a hushed tone, his face was grave. Hermione stilled. "In my nightmares, you are die. And I let it happen, because I was cowardly that night. I should have done more to help you. I should have stopped her, but I was such a coward and it still haunts me."

Hermione was crying uncontrollably. Bellatrix's torture was common knowledge through all the post war trials. She shook her head. "Something else."

"Love by The Lake. Page 89, your character's kiss for the first time." He stepped towards her, and his hand wrapped around hers. "Page 157, they have their first official date." Draco slowly pulled the gun away. The wands clattered to the ground and Hermione sobbed. She didn't know what was happening to her. She was panicking. She couldn't breathe.

Draco pulled her against his chest as she sobbed. "It's alright, baby. It's alright."

"No it's not." She cried against his chest.

"Hermione, you're safe. I'm not going anywhere." His arms wrapped around her. He held her for several minutes before walking her to the bed, where he pulled her into his lap. He summoned a drought of peace and forced her to swallow.

He rocked her through the trembling and at some point she fell back asleep.

When she woke again she was completely exhausted, feeling hollow, as if someone had carved through her body with a dull spoon. Draco still held her, his arms wrapped protectively around her. Her chest ached. She pulled away from him and hid in the bathroom for a long time.

The irony of repeating the same situation from all those months ago was not lost on her. She took a shower and heard the handle jiggle, but he didn't knock. She showered for a ridiculously long time. Trying to convince herself she could face the embarrassment of panicking and holding a fucking gun towards Draco. The overwhelming amount of feelings she had for him, plus the memory of the fake Draco threatening his life, It all made her feel hysterical. It was too much.

He was real. He was the real Draco. She knew by how he looked at her. It was as obvious as day and night. The fake Draco looked like she was a piece of meat, her Draco looked at her like she was precious, but the letter and his words, and the man's hand on her ass still burned in her mind, leaving her with a conflicting swirl of emotions.

He was waiting for her in the living room, his face tight and cold, the Daily Prophet was in his hands. "When were you going to tell me?"

He wasn't angry, he was hurt. He placed the paper on the table.

#### *Granger Drunk at Gala After Finding Malfoy In Another Woman's Arms!*

Hermione watched the images dance on the page. One image showed Hermione dancing with Draco, another of her angrily drinking champagne, and the last one of Draco and Astoria Greengrass embraced in an enthusiastic kiss, his hand groping her breast.

Hermione spoke quietly. "I was going to tell you when you got home."

His jaw was set hard. "Why don't you trust me Hermione?"

"Because you don't trust me," she said, sitting next to him, grabbing the paper. "At least we know, they don't realize you're in those pictures they threatened me with." She said pointing to the photo of him and Astoria, His shirt was halfway unbuttoned, his sleeves rolled up, showing off his dark mark, but nothing else. "Your tattoos are missing."

"I do trust you, Hermione. I trust you on a level you don't even realize. Did you notice that my wand responded to you instantly?" He turned away from her, "Whatever they're doing is already working."

"I'm not afraid of you Draco," she said. "I was overwhelmed and confused. I'm so sorry." She covered her eyes with her hands, she didn't want to keep crying, but apparently she was not out of tears. "I'm so sorry." The sticky, tar-like shame moved through her like hot lava. She was burning hot from it, overwhelmed by its intensity.

"I would never hurt you Hermione," Draco said. "Ever."

"I know," she said. "I know that. I know how to tell the difference between you and him, apparently there are multiple of you..."

"How? How do you know?" He said, "Because you didn't know earlier and-"

"You look at me completely differently. You touch me differently. You feel differently," she said, reaching for his hand. "I'm overwhelmed by my own feelings, Draco. Dancing with him

was awful and I want to cut off his arm for groping me, but-”

“What did he do to you?” Draco’s voice was hard and cold. Deadly.

Hermione closed her eyes briefly and started from the beginning.

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Draco had never felt more rage in his life as Hermione recounted her time at the gala. He knew he shouldn’t have left. *He fucking knew it.* It was already bad enough his witch had to see an image of him kissing another woman, which made his stomach churn violently, but it made him murderous to think of another man’s hands on her.

He sat next to Hermione, stroking her hand listening to her recount the details, that phone call with her now made much more sense. He had heard her fear, her discomfort. She still didn’t trust him. How could she? She was being reminded constantly of his shortcomings, of how much he didn’t deserve her. He knew he didn’t deserve her and a better man might back down or let her go, but Draco was not a better man. He was selfish and greedy and the only future he saw was one with her in it. Even if he had to force her.

“Say something,” she said, when she finished. What was there to say?

“I wish you would have told me,” He said, quietly. “I wish you would have said something when you called me and instead you told me everything was fine when clearly you were not.”

“I was waiting for you to get home. Nothing would have changed if I would have said anything. I wouldn’t have risked Connor’s life over mine.”

“You still omitted the truth.” He exhaled. “I asked if you were okay and you said yes, you were not okay.” This was the ultimate offense, why was she lying about something so unnecessary? She could have said she was upset.

“Draco you’re not exactly transparent either. You want me to trust you? Talk to me about the letter, talk to me about what you and Harry do, talk to me about how you’ve been following me around for years. Any of it would be helpful.”

He held her gaze. “And have you panicking again? Have you run away from me?”

“Don’t use my emotions against me,” she gritted.

“I’m not using them against you, I’m waiting until you’re ready and you’re not ready.”

“That’s not for you to decide.” She replied, letting go of his hand, pressing the palms of her hands over her eyes.

"Right, I don't have any say in anything in your life. I can't be afraid for your safety even when some man who looks exactly like me is parading around Europe and grabbing my witch, threatening her life. I can't tell you what to do or where to live, I can't give you things or offer to take care of you." He stood up from the couch. "But one thing I'm in charge of is my own feelings and right now I don't want to share them with you, because you don't want to share yours either, at least, give me that truth. Don't lie to me and tell me you're willing to be honest when you're not."

Hermione bit her lip. "If we just discuss the letter from Askaban-"

"I don't want to be reminded of Askaban!" He said, his skin prickling. "I hated that fucking place and everytime I hear the word my skin crawls, my heart races, and I want to throw up." He took a breath. "We can talk about Askaban when you agree to live somewhere else."

"That's not fair at all." She said on an exhale.

"You're brilliant." Draco said moving towards the kitchen he needed a fucking drink he didn't care that it was only nine in the morning. "And yet you fail to use your brain to keep yourself even remotely safe." He was exhausted from traveling, tired of arguing with her when all he wanted was to tell her how much he loved her, and everytime she brought up the letter from Azkaban he wanted to hit his head against the wall. No, he didn't want to talk about her letter from Azkaban. He didn't want to talk about bullying her. He didn't want to talk about how he tried writing her, apparently too many fucking times. None of it was his idea of a good time. He'd been trying so hard to show her how he cared about her, show her he was trustworthy, how different he was now, but none of it mattered. He had to be patient, it was the normal appropriate thing to do in a relationship with someone. He knew to be in love with someone when they'd been dating weeks was not normal, but it was still hard as fuck to reign himself in.

He grabbed the firewhiskey out of her kitchen cupboard and drank straight from the bottle. He didn't know what to do. It was either argue with her constantly and still have her be unsafe, or pretend he could handle her bravery and play nice. He didn't know how to keep her safe and not be fighting her. When he turned around she was standing in the doorway, she looked just as exhausted, skittish even.

"Do you still want to go to the dinner party tonight at Theo's?" He asked, pretending to be normal, pretending he didn't want to drag her out of this flat and to a remote cabin in the woods. Harry knew where it was, he'd allow him to visit occasionally. She'd be fine. Perhaps even Pansy could come. She could still write her books there...

"Do you?" She asked, uncertainty was written all over her face, like she was expecting him to yell at her or worse. That had to be because of Weasley. The fucker could rot in hell. She might not be afraid of Draco, but she was still experiencing a lot of fear.

"Yes, I'd like to go." He sighed, taking another swig of his drink. He leaned against the counter. The Daily Prophet article would be hard to counteract without accusing people of using polyjuice potion. He'd have more support at the dinner party, he might as well get their friends to voice their opinion on the matter.

She shifted on her feet. "It's just we've been arguing so much and-."

"Couples argue," he said. "It's not the end of the world. If you don't want to go we will stay home. The Nott Manor is one of the few places I feel completely comfortable taking you though."

"Okay." She said quietly, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Would you like to take a nap with me? I haven't slept much." He offered. *Just let me hold you.*

"You're not angry with me?"

"I'm angry at the situation and I'm struggling to understand your perspective, but I'm not mad at you. I just wish, I wish things were different." He said. *I wished you weren't afraid of loving me.*

She didn't respond for a long time and then she finally nodded. "Okay. A nap is probably a good idea."

They were back in bed and he held her close, rubbing her hair, his eyes were closed and for a moment he could pretend someone wasn't threatening his life or trying to take his witch from him. For a moment he could just relish in holding her, loving her without needing her permission.

"How did you know I was done with my period?" She said after a long stretch of silence.

"I didn't." He replied.

"That was risky," she said.

He didn't know what to say, so he told her the truth.

"I love all parts of you, Hermione."

## Chapter End Notes

TW: NON CONSENSUAL GROPING/TOUCHING

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings listed at the bottom notes to avoid possible spoilers.

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

Hermione once again was dressed in a dress Draco bought her, a green one. It had glittering silver draco constellations repeated along the fabric and Hermione was certain he had this custom made for her. There was no other way to make sense of how well it fit against her skin. She was tempted to ask if the same person who made this dress was the same person who made his magical shirt. All of the questions she wanted to ask him were stuck behind the letter she held in her hand. She didn't need to read it now to know what the paper held. She'd memorized the words a long time ago.

Draco was on the phone in the sitting room and she stood inside her closet with the door closed. They were about to go to the dinner party at Theo's, but Hermione's mind was racing. Shame about her panic attack felt stuck against her skin like an oily residue, her anxiety snaked through reminding her it could happen again, rock hard frustration sat against her chest because they kept arguing, a sour disappointment about why he wouldn't talk to her about this letter settled in her stomach making her nauseous, and that ever present fear still beat with alongside her pulse.

All of her feelings that she'd carefully caged, were escaping that vault in her mind. *It was too much.* They'd moved way too fast. That's exactly what happened with Ron. He wanted everything to go fast and here she was repeating the same mistakes. She swallowed, unfolding the wrinkled parchment, and she read the words that haunted her so frequently.

*Hermione,*

*Of course I'm ignoring your letters. Did you think that just because I had the decency to write a thank you note for your testimony that I suddenly became a mudblood lover?*

*I could hardly touch the parchment because I didn't want your mudblood filth sliming my skin up.*

*I don't want to read your fucking books.*

*I don't want to see your ugly face.*

*I don't want to ever speak to you again.*

*You disgust me.*

*Do not write to me. I never want to be contacted by you again.*

*Do not come visit me. I never want to be seen with you in public.*

*Could you imagine the things the world would say about me? I would never slum it with such trash like you, not even in a hellhole like Askaban.*

*You must be more stupid than I thought, so let me spell it out for you loud and clear:*

*I hate muggles and more than anything else I hate you.*

*I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.*

*Do you get it now?*

*With the utmost sincerity,*

*Draco Malfoy*

Hermione refolded the letter and stuffed it back into the box, placing it back on the shelf. It was good to reminder herself that she had reasons to not trust him. He might have his own reasons not to trust her, but she wouldn't allow herself to forget the validity of her own pain. He'd leave her eventually, especially if he couldn't talk about this. It's what people did, they left. As she slipped her silver heels on, she was proud of herself for not crying at the words this time.

She met Draco in the living room.

“You look beautiful,” he said, a soft smile on his lips.

“Thank you,” she returned his smile. Things were awkward. It was obvious they were both tiptoeing around each other, both afraid to say the wrong thing.

“Shall we go?” He gestured to the floo.

Theo’s manor was decked out in christmas decor and the sitting room was filled with fresh christmas trees, twinkling lights, and stacks of presents. It smelled like mulled wine and pine. The fact that it was the end of November was unreal. Neville, Luna, Blaise, Pansy, Theo, Harry and Ginny were already there. She hugged each of her friends as she said hello.

“Hermione, you look gorgeous!” Ginny pulled her into a tight hug.

“Thanks, Gin,” she replied.

“Let’s grab you a drink and catch up it’s been awhile since we had a proper chat.” Ginny smiled as her eyes darted to Pansy, who was in an enthusiastic debate with Neville about the risks of a plant that smoothed wrinkles, but could also paralyze you if ingested too often. “I may also have a few questions about your publicist.” Ginny said as they walked over to the bar cart.

“I can summarize Pansy.” Hermione chuckled, pouring herself a generous glass of mulled wine. “Be prepared for brutal honesty about all of your outfits, compliment her only when you’re completely sincere, because she will see right through the ones you half-ass, I gift her a really long massages throughout the year because she doesn’t know how to relax on her own, and a going to a museum is her worst fucking nightmare. Ask me how I know that one.” Hermione wrinkled her nose.

“She’s fucking delightful.” Ginny said, over the rim of her firewhiskey. “You know when Harry and I both ended things, I wasn’t heart broken. That’s how I started questioning if I liked Harry or rather I simple liked the idea of Harry. And I backed away from relationships after that, I wanted to explore and date around, but I’ve always wondered if there is such a thing as a soul mate, you know? Like the story books describe, the one where your soul’s recognize each other, I’ve always wondered if that existed. Do you believe in soulmates Hermione?”

Hermione was taken back by the question. She sputtered, “I don’t know. Do you?” Ginny looked completely captivated as she watch Pansy stomp her feet in protest to Neville’s insistence to the risks she’d be taking using it as often as she does.

“I don’t know.” Ginny said wistfully. “But Pansy is the first time I’ve ever wanted to find out. To just take the risk so gallantly. I’m not the one to usually make the first move and I generally, but Pansy...” Her voice trailed off, Pansy smirked, making Neville blush all over his face. “Pansy has me doing all sorts of firsts.” She sighed, turning her gaze back to Hermione. “It’s only been one date and I’m in big trouble. Do you have any insights for me? Am I about to make a fool of myself if I ask her out again?”

Hermione smiled at Ginny with genuine joy for the both of them. Hermione replied. “If you make it to a first date you make it farther than eighty percent of people who ask her out. A second dates are where you should really lay it on thick, she wants to be pursued. And as her best friend, I do like how you talk about her. She deserves someone crazy about her.”

“No pressure.” Ginny sipped her drink. “Speaking of crazy about you, Malfoy hasn’t stopped looking our way. How are things courting Draco Malfoy?”

“Generally very, very good, sometimes surreal, and currently we’re in a weird space post-argument.” Hermione exhaled.

“So just like a normal couple?” Ginny let out a bubbling laugh.

Hermione shifted her weight, they were anything but a normal couple. “I guess so.” Hermione took a drink of her wine. “I don’t want to overstep Gin, but I was wondering if I

could talk to you about Ron.”

“Oh Merlin,” Ginny rolled her eyes. “I’ll summarize Ron for you. I have no fucking clue what he’s doing. The ministry bid has been so bizarre, one minute he was talking about buying more properties, the next he’s saying he wants to be minister of magic. It’s a wild ride.”

“And his relationship with Daphne? I didn’t know they were even courting let alone getting married.” Hermione asked, glancing at Draco right as his eyes shifted to hers. She looked away immediately, nervous under his stare.

“It was kept quiet for a while, the Greengrasses were pretty private about it and I only knew about it because my mother let it slip. Molly is beside herself with trying to help with wedding plans, but Daphne isn’t fond of my mother. It’s been a lot of drama. The bridesmaids dresses are in fact the most horrific thing I’ve ever seen. Bright pink!” Ginny grimaced. “With red hearts all over them!” She took another swig of her drink. “They’re taking the Valentine’s Day theme to the extreme.”

“It sounds entertaining at least.” Hermione chuckled. “Good dinner party stories to tell.”

“True.” Ginny smirked.

“But Ron...” Hermione tried to phrase it carefully. “Is he alright? He’s been very harsh with me. At first I thought it was the breakup and then I just...I don’t know. It’s all very odd.”

Ginny seemed to consider her words as well. “Truthfully, I’m not too close with Ron any more. I love him, he’s my brother after all, but we don’t talk much anymore and I haven’t tried to change that. I travel a lot, I’m enjoying my life, but,” Ginny sighed. “Please don’t say anything. Swear it.”

“Of course, my lips are sealed.” Hermione lowered her voice.

“Earlier this year, I think you two were still dating actually. Ron,” Ginny took another breath, “Ron asked me to lose a quidditch match on purpose.”

“What?” Hermione gasped. “No.”

“Yeah. It was so insulting and I got really upset.” Ginny shook her head. “I didn’t talk to him for several months afterwards. That’s why I was so distant when you two broke up, I know that was shitty of me, but I was so angry. He told me it wasn’t that big of a deal, but it was a huge deal to me. He’s apologized since and hasn’t approached me again, but it hasn’t been the same since. Other than a little small talk at family gatherings we avoid each other.”

“Why would he do that?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know.” Ginny frowned. “My guess is betting, I checked the records after he asked me and it wasn’t him who bet, but it was Jameson Greengrass who did a massive bet on the opposing team. I’m not sure what kind of relationship Ron had with him at that point, but it was suspicious to me. Neither of them have bet again though, I’ve checked a few times.”

"I'm so sorry Ron asked you to cheat for him. That's actually awful."

Ginny's smile was a sad one, "I know. It was really low, but honestly not very surprising. So many small moments I can see led Ron to that point. Him constantly copying Harry's homework, him begging you for help on all his tests, him trying to get the upper hand and labeling it as strategy. He wanted success and as many shortcuts as possible. I truly don't know what happened after the war for him but it's like all of those annoying personality traits magnified into some ghastly flaws."

"Alright lovely people, let's sit down for dinner." Theo announced, wrapping an arm around Hermione's shoulders. He was wearing a red suit and a Santa cap. Hermione grinned at the sight of him.

They all sat down at the table at their designated name tag. Draco sat across from her at the table, with the other men and Hermione on the other side with the women, Pansy and Theo taking each end of the table. Draco's glances were not heated ones, but more like curious, searching ones, like he was trying to read her next move. Hermione felt too much and the overwhelm was still getting to her.

As dinner was served a polite conversation began and Luna asked about Theo's mystery date.

"How was your most recent date, Theodore?" Luna asked in her sugary, melodic voice.

"It was quite nice." He smirked.

"Any chance you'll tell us who this person is?" Pansy all but growled.

"Not today." Theo bit back a smile.

"What's so great about these dates anyway?" Hermione asked. "Why are you being so secretive?"

"The dates are very romantic, some of my favorite dates actually, but I'm not being secretive, I'm being private." Theo gave a tight smile, "and there is a big difference."

"What about you, Hermione?" Luna asked. "What was the best date you ever went on?"

Hermione knew her answer immediately and giggled. Her eyes locked on his and he smiled, suppressing a laugh of his own. He nodded his head, giving consent to tell the story.

"Well first you must know it was with Theodore Nott."

All eyes in the room swung to Theo. All but one pair, that is. Draco's eyes were on Hermione. She gave him a coy smile, he huffed a laugh. It felt good when they were on the same page, when they weren't arguing.

“Yes, this date is absolutely by far the best date of my life actually. Start from the beginning.” Theo chuckled, leaning back in his chair, sipping his drink. He was definitely excited to help share this story.

“Theo and I met at a three day book conference where I was speaking as an author. I had just published my very first book. It was about a year or so after the war ended. We spent all three days chatting about writing, publishing, more writing and reading.”

“Such a fabulous event and Hermione did so well during her speech,” Theo said.

“And at the end of the three days Theo asks me to dinner. He’s superbly handsome and I think he’s asking me out on a date so I say yes.” Hermione smiled.

“And I *was* asking her on a date, obviously she’s gorgeous and crazy brilliant.”

“But then after I say yes, he says...”

“And we can talk more about publishing your next book” Theo grimaces. “I was very nervous to talk to *the* Hermione Granger.”

“And I walk away thinking, oh this isn’t a date you idiot, it’s a work dinner. I had also mentioned that I was looking for an editor for my books, so I go into dinner thinking it’s a work dinner and bring the first draft of my next book.” Hermione shrugged.

“Truly romantic for Hermione Granger.” Theo sighed. Hermione rolled her eyes a warm laughter circled the room.

“I show up, pepper him with at least a hundred questions about his editing process, and about half way through I bring out my 400 page manuscript.”

“She drops it on the table with a huge thunk, and I finally say, ‘Granger do you do this on all your dates or am I just that special? And Hermione is completely mortified.’ Theo knocks his head back in laughter.

“I was so embarrassed.” Hermione covers her eyes briefly, trying to control her laughter. “So then I say ‘I thought this was a working dinner not a date,’ But yes let’s have a date!”

“To which I say, “well either way is fine with me.” Theo shook his head. “I had no idea at this point what was happening. We were much too polite to each other.”

“And I say yes either way is fine with me too.” Hermione giggled.

“So we both spent the rest of the date completely unsure if it was a date or not.” Theo sighs again, “Tragic, but then things get juicy.”

“By the end of the date we haven’t spoken very much and I feel awful about ruining the date. And I really liked spending time with Theo during the conference and so I thought if I just kissed him maybe it would make things better.”

“How would that help?” Pansy asked, laughing out loud.

“I have no bloody clue, my brain was doing strange things.” Hermione shook her head.

“She leans in to kiss me and I lean in as well but she opens her mouth right before I move in to kiss her.” Theo said.

“I was getting nervous and second guessed myself. I opened my mouth right as Theo’s puckered lips landed inside my mouth.” Hermione said, cheeks red as Theo’s suit, she couldn’t contain her giggles at this point.

“Hermione is literally sucking my face off.” Everyone is laughing at this point, Harry’s is a snickering one and Draco lets out that rare deep laugh Hermione loved so much.

“I pull away and practically die of embarrassment, because I couldn’t stop laughing. I clamped my mouth down and could barely breathe.” She replied, she takes a drink of her wine to help her stop laughing.

“I could see her trying not to laugh, she looked so embarrassed and so naturally I pretended to cry.” Theo said.

“I burst into full blown uncontrollable laughter right after he started to cry.” Hermione said, already wheezing from laughter again, “I felt horrible about laughing about it, but I couldn’t stop it. It was just too funny and too horrible all at once.”

“She starts patting my back, saying there there, it wasn’t so awful, do you want to try again?” He mimicked Hermione’s voice.

Harry shook his head, “She’s so bloody nice she offered to try again?”

“I was hysterical after that and couldn’t stop laughing either.” Theo wiped tears from his eyes.

“Which led to more laughing for the both of us.” Hermione grinned, looking at Theo with admiration.

“When we finally stopped we looked at each other and Hermione said, “I really like you Theo, can we please be friends?”

“And Theo said, “I’d love nothing more.” Hermione smiled even wider.

“So why is that your favorite date?” Neville chuckled.

Hermione smiled, her voice taking a more serious tone. “It’s my favorite date because it gave me Theo as one of my best friends and I was quite lonely at that time in my life.”

“Plus we’ve been dating ever since.” Theo winked at Hermione. “Platonically.”

“Stop using that bloody word.” Pansy rolled her eyes.

After dessert was served, Ginny left due to early morning quidditch practice and shortly after that Luna and Neville left as well. The remaining group moved back to the sitting room, Hermione took a large wingback chair, reminding her how only a month ago they all sat in chairs like these for their truth or dare game.

“Hermione,” Theo said. “I was considering redecorating my guest bedroom, any chance you’d like to stay over for a few days and help me?”

Hermione considered her schedule, which was nothing because she had canceled most of her activities. “I suppose.” She still had a lot to do around Askaban, but she could help him.

“Also, I’d love a girls night.” Pansy added. “Ginny and I could come stay here for a weekend?”

“That would be fun.” Hermione said, sipping her drink. “Why Nott Manor? We could stay at my house.” Before Pansy answered Harry spoke.

“Also we never got to hang out recently, the gala certainly didn’t count,” he said. “Not really anyway, you’ve been busy with your book, you should come stay at Grimmauld place for a few days. We need to talk about a lot of things.” Harry ran a hand through his hair.

Hermione’s stomach twisted as all her friends stared at her. Draco was being too quiet. Blaise avoided her eye contact.

“Is this some kind of intervention?” Hermione said, disappointment souring her stomach like fermented pumpkin juice. “Are you all trying to babysit me?” She inched forward on her seat, her heart beat faster.

“If you’re going to research dangerous magical prisons you might as well be safe while doing it.” Theo said, matter-a-factly. “Come live here with me. I begged you to move in with me after your breakup with Ron, but you insisted on moving to that blasted muggle neighborhood.”

“It’s a very nice neighborhood.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “And I’m perfectly safe in my own home.”

“For now.” Pansy replied. “We don’t know what is going to happen.”

“The blood wards on our houses are so powerful, Hermione.” Harry said. “The Black family wards are incredibly fascinating, you would love to look at them.”

“I’m not interested in having this conversation with any of you.” Hermione stood. “This is ridiculous.” She turned to Draco. “And I’m sure this was your doing?”

Draco’s jaw stayed hard, but his expression gave away nothing.

“Don’t blame Draco for us trying to help you.” Pansy snapped. “You’re being ridiculous, Hermione. Please, that imposter could have done anything to you at the gala. I can’t lose you.” Her voice cracked and Hermione could feel her own throat tighten.

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I don’t need-”

"Yeah, yeah, we've all heard how you don't need any help from anybody. We know you're independent and all that, but this isn't the time to be alone." Theo said. "You've got children screaming crucio at you, fake Draco dancing with you and ruining real Draco's reputation, you've already experienced explosions, and nude pictures of you being used as blackmail. I mean at what point do you think it's appropriate for you to do something different?" Theo looked at her expectantly.

"Never." Hermione folded her arms. "I don't need to leave, I have the runic stones, I have my own wards, the security cameras, the extra wards from Blaise and Draco, I have my own fucking brain, and a ticking clock where Askaban might be laundering money to corrupt politicians and torturing prisoners. I'm not going to-

"No, one is asking you to give up," Harry said. "I know how you feel Hermione, I know what it's like to be fighting a fight that no one believes in. We just want you to be safe. What if you spend your days at Nott's manor or Malfoy manor for now?"

"And allow one of us to make sure you get home safely?" Pansy, asked, crying silently.  
"Please."

Hermione was silent for a long time. She didn't like to be strong armed into things, she understood where they were coming from, but...she sighed. "Fine. I'll stay at Nott manor or Malfoy manor during the day," she conceded, but she was still bristling with irritation. "I'm going home now."

She left the room quickly and floo'd home. Draco came shortly after her.

"Why would you do that?" Hermione said as soon as he was standing. "Why wouldn't you at least warn me tonight was some kind of power play?"

"I didn't do anything. They all saw The Daily Prophet and are all equally concerned. Are you upset because they agree with me now? Things are escalating Hermione, it's time to set aside your pride and let others help you." He took off his suit jacket, then his tie, his voice already tired.

"This isn't about pride, this is about you overstepping. We've been dating for only a few weeks and you're being overbearing and dramatic and..."

"I don't care," he shrugged, the nonchalance in his voice made her grit her teeth "I really, truly don't care what you call me or if I'm being overbearing or dramatic. Your life," he pointed at her, "is more important than anything else. And if you won't prioritize it, I will." He began taking off his cufflinks.

She squeezed her eyes shut, the overwhelm was building to a point of explosion. "This is too much." She pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Yes, it is. The whole situation is." He hissed, rolling up his sleeves. "And I need you to take it seriously now. I'm grateful that you'll be at the manor or at Theo's but the reluctance to keep you safe is really getting out. It's infuriating actually."

"No. I'm not talking about the threats. I'm talking about you." She said quietly. "This is all too much." She gestured between them and his expression changed entirely, all that non chalance disappearing to something cold and harsh.

"It's late." He replied stiffly. "We've both had a hard few days and I think we should just go to bed."

"Tell me the truth Draco," Hermione said in a whispered plea.

"You don't want the truth," his eyes widened. "You just told me I was too much for you and you think I'm going to tell you more? You don't even know what you want." He began to walk down the hallway toward her bedroom.

"The truth is you hate me Draco and you just won't admit it." Hermione snapped following him down the hall, tears forming in her eyes. "You hate me."

Draco stopped, then as if changing his mind, he continued forward, pushing the bedroom door open. Hermione stood in the bedroom doorway. "I think you need to leave," she said.

"If you think I'm sleeping anywhere else after being away for five days, then you're wrong..." Draco said, turning to face her. His coldness was lined with a sadness that made Hermione's chest tighten.

"If you want to give me ultimatums I'll give you them too." She folded her arms, she'd be the nonchalant one now. "I think we should talk about the letter first, if you can't talk about it, then you should leave." Her eyes dropped to her feet, trying to ignore the guilt she felt.

"Hermione, I don't care about the letter. We don't need to discuss it." He said, in a raw plea. Maybe he was embarrassed, but she deserved the truth.

"I care though." Hermione gritted her teeth, her guilt suddenly gone. She couldn't trust him if he wasn't willing to take responsibility for his actions. "I don't think you should stay here tonight."

His eyes narrowed on her and his lip twitched, she wasn't afraid of him, she trusted without question with her safety, but that gaze of his when he was upset was every bit as intimidating as McLaggen said. Draco was a scary person when you were under that stare.

He was breathing harder, his patience running thin. "We are having an argument, you don't have to push me away. Please, don't push me away."

"I can't trust you if you can't tell me the truth. Nor can I trust you if you think hiding me away is the solution. That's the only plan you have. Hide me in a manor behind blood wards, right?"

His jaw tightened as he walked towards her, she stepped backwards in the hallway. He kept moving towards her, so she moved backwards again hitting the wall behind her. He stood directly in front of her, his gaze a haunting mixture of emotions.

"Hermione, I don't understand what you want from me." He whispered. "I'm trying so hard to get you to—"

"Just tell me how you feel about me. Tell me the truth," she said, her voice shaking.

The hardness in his face deepened as he spoke. "How I feel about you is complicated. I have a hard time properly expressing myself when it comes to you."

"That's your excuse?" She scoffed. "I'll help you out. You hate me. Admit it." Vitriol in every word, she said.

"I'll feel however you want me to feel about you." The softness of his voice pissed her off.

"Oh shut up," she said through her pursed lips. "You can't even admit it. You can't even tell the truth! Do I have to dare you Malfoy? Is that it?"

He took a step towards her, barely separated by half step now. "Is that what you want, Hermione? You want me to hate you?"

"I don't want you to stay here tonight." She replied, her eyes darting to his lips and back to his eyes. "I think you should go."

"I don't believe you." He said, his eyes searching for a sign she was serious. But she was serious. She didn't want him here. She needed space and time to think and couldn't think when he was constantly around her.

She breathed hard as they faced each. He closed the space between them and there was nowhere to go, as his arms caged around her against the wall. "I don't want to see you." She emphasized each word and her voice shook as his face lowered in front of hers.

He smirked at her, ignoring her words.

"Tell me how badly you want me to hate you, Hermione," he practically purred. "Is that what turns you on, darling?"

"I just want you to tell the truth." She whimpered, as a war of sensations battled through her body. She wanted to kiss him and kick him simultaneously. She wanted to scream at him and...

"I can hate you. If that's what you want." He pressed against his body against hers. "I can hate you and I'll still want you. I'll feel whatever you want me to."

"So you admit it, you finally admit that you hate me." She breathed.

He rolled his eyes, hissing the words. "Admit that you *want* me to hate you."

"You're the pureblood. That's your job." She sneered, it was a low blow, but she was overwhelmed. Their mouths were so close she could taste his breath, but the anger was burning her alive and she'd take him down with her.

"I hate you." He said murmured, with a taunting smirk. And something strange twisted inside her chest. It was simultaneously relieving and satisfying and heartbreak.

Her cheeks heated from his gaze, his eyes dropped to her cheeks as the pink spread like a growing flame, and his smirk grew wider.

"Careful darling." He said, low and raspy as he pulled away from her body. "Or else I might think you want to fuck me right now."

A shudder ran down her spine as his hand wrapped around her neck, his thumb brushed across her pulse point. He leaned over her, whispering next to her ear, "Is that what you want?" He rasped, barely audible. "You want me to degrade and debase you?" She pressed her body harder against the wall, trying to find reprieve from his body heat.

"I hate you." He purred wickedly. He was mocking her, but her pulse lept at his words and she was experiencing a strange mixture of lust and shame.

His cold laugh had an edge of bitterness that didn't go unnoticed by her. "All you have to do is ask, baby." His grip on her neck tightened slightly, and she exhaled a frustrated breath out of her nose. She always wanted him, that wasn't the problem, but she needed the truth.

"I just want to know how you fucking feel." She spat out.

"I think," his belt buckle came undone. "You actually want me to fuck you while I tell you how much I loathe you."

"No," she swallowed.

He huffed a breath. "Oh come on, you'll have to try a better than that."

His hand darted under her dress, cupping her between her legs, and she gasped, pressing on her tiptoes.

"If I stick my fingers inside you, will you soaking wet for me?" he whispered. His fingers stroked along the dampened fabric. He was toying with her.

"No." She said again, breathlessly.

"You're a terrible liar. It's like you're not even trying..." His thumb pressing hard against her clit through the fabric. She hissed, forcing herself to look at the ceiling, pressing her palms into the wall.

"Say no again." He taunted, breathing harder against her face.

She just wanted him to admit how he felt. It was the truth and she needed to hear it. "Just tell me the truth." She gritted through her teeth, forcing herself to look at him again.

He arched his brow. "Oh, baby you're so pathetic." His fingers dug into her knickers and pulled sharply ripping the fabric apart. "You're embarrassed, aren't you?" His smile was as predatory as it was mocking, his thumb brushed against that racing pulse point in her neck.

He leaned back into her pressing his body heavily against hers, the hardness of his cock against her hip, made her speechless.

“Are you ashamed of your dark thoughts darling? Is that it?” He breathed against her neck as he spoke and cold goosebumps rippled across her skin. “I have my own dark thoughts about you too. I think the difference between us is that I’m not ashamed of them. *Any of them*.” He spoke so softly, but there was no mistaking that razor sharp edge that he balanced in each word. “Do you know how many times I’ve fantasized about taking you whenever I please? One time,” His free hand skated down her body, then wrapped around her waist. “I was watching you in the grocery store and all I could think about was pushing up your skirt and taking you against the alley wall.” Her breathing was choppy and uneven as he spoke. “And I think you would have enjoyed it.” He purred, silky and sweet.

She supposed that was the warning to what he did next.

He was not soft when he lifted her up and he was not gentle when pressed inside her. It was hard, rough, and fast. His hand remained around her neck, tightening slightly when he lifted her onto his cock. A loud cry escaped her in the mixture of pain and pleasure. Her traitorous legs tightened around his waist as he began to pound into her with an arrogant satisfaction on his face.

It felt entirely too good, but there was a disturbed part of her brain hissing at her that she shouldn’t enjoy any of it, and an oily shame coated her insides.

“So. Fucking. Wet.” His tone was arrogant and condescending. His lips brushed her ear. “I hate you.” He enunciated each word, crisp and clear. “I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.” Her skin burned with shame, with pleasure, and with overwhelming need. Her hips were rocking into him on their own accord, she wasn’t in control, her body was. She was surely fucked in the head if this turned her on so much. She didn’t want him to hate her, but she knew that it was the truth. A dirty truth and it made her dirty too.

His eyes were hooded when he leaned his forehead against hers still thrusting hard and unrestrained into her. Hermione moved to kiss him and his hand moved from her neck, clamping over her mouth, in one quick motion, pressing her head into the wall behind her.

“You don’t get to kiss me if you want me to hate you.” He said with a steely resolve. Her eyes fluttered. “I hate you and you’re still mine.” He said. “You’re mine baby. Mine.” He bit out the words like threats and she bit down on his palm as her orgasm became inevitable.

“My own personal fucktoy.” He licked the shell of her ear.

She gave into it, into the carnal, twisted emotions blooming inside her

His eyes locked on hers. “I hate you.” He was breathless, his eyes wild, almost feral.

Each time he repeated the words they had less heat in them.

Each time he said he hated her it was less convincing.

She bit down into his skin even harder, it had to hurt like hell, but he made no indication that it bothered him.

“I can feel you clenching and fluttering on my cock.” His words were rushed now, rougher and raspy. “My lying little whore is going to come all because I hate her.” He was so deep inside her and her mouth let go of his palm as a sharp searing rush of pleasure cut through her. His hand twisted, gripping her chin, forcing her to look straight into his eyes. He came with her, groaning so loudly it might have been a roar. Her chest heaved and a trickle of sweat fell down his forehead. He stopped moving, but still had her pressed into the wall. His jaw ticked as he stared at her.

“You don’t want to see me? That’s fine. Just remember who you fucking belong to.” He said.

He pulled out of her, setting her down. Her legs were shaking and weak, but his fingers moved right back inside her core and she gasped by the sudden intrusion. “Here.” He said, pulling his shiny wet fingers up to her lips. “Here’s your kiss, baby,” he spread his come and her arousal messily around her lips, then pushed his two fingers into her mouth, dragging against her tongue. He pulled his fingers out slowly. “I don’t think I’ll ask permission anymore now that I know you like it that way.”

She stayed plastered to the wall as he walked past her, unable to move her body or make sense of what happened or why they were fighting or if they had broken up.

“Hermione!” Harry’s voice called from the fireplace “I need help!” She rushed to the bathroom, fixing her dress and cleaning up.

Malfoy was gone when she walked into the living room. Harry was pacing frantically, looking completely overwhelmed and then he blurted, “I told Theo I loved him.”

## Chapter End Notes

TW: Degradation and dubious consent

# Chapter 25

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the love, comments, kudos, theories, and support. I'm having so much fun writing this story. Some of these scenes have lived rent free in my mind for a year. Also, I love smut. Enjoy the ride!

This chapter is what I'll refer to as the stalker's tango. Alexa play, Stalker's Tango by Autoheart

Also, I updated the tags to help. :)

"Okay?" Hermione laughed, trying to make her voice sound as normal as possible. "I'm sure he loved that, he loves being complimented. Would you like a drink? I need more wine."

"Uh, sure." Harry said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Hermione walked into her kitchen and opened the- "Where did my wine go?" Realization twisted through her. He took the fucking wine?

She opened another cupboard and found the firewhiskey he'd drunk just this morning. He gifted her, *read bribed her*, with wine in their stupid courting contract and he took it back! What an asshole. Hermione poured the alcohol and walked back into the room, "Apparently I'm out of wine." She handed Harry the glass, "I need to get out of this dress." She began walking to her room.

"Hermione, wait." Harry said. "I'm in love with him."

"What?" Hermione turned around. "In love with who?"

"With Theo." Harry's cheek's grew crimson. "We've been dating. It's been so great. He's so charming and thoughtful and really great in bed and I- I- I think I'm in love with him." Harry began to chug the whiskey. "I am in love with him. It's not a question, actually."

Hermione had gone slack jawed, completely stunned at Harry's confession. "And what did Theo say?" Hermione moved to the couch. "Sit down and tell me everything."

Harry sat, leaning back against the couch gripping his glass, "He was really quiet and said, 'that's nice.'" Harry shook his head and then he kissed me and said goodnight." He turned to her. "I just made a complete fool of myself."

Hermione giggled, "I hate to break this to you, but Theo gets love confessions a lot." Harry frowned. "He does?"

Hermione nodded, sipping her drink. “Yes and Theo is so kind to everyone he meets and-”

“And by kind you mean flirty?” Harry lifted his brows.

“Yes, a little, but that’s Theo. He’s this flirty, overly kind, overly generous person and most people think he’s not being genuine, but he really is. It’s why Pansy is so protective of him, it’s why I love him too.”

Harry sighed, “but you’re not in love with him.” He turned his head slowly, “right?”

Hermione’s chest squeezed, “No, I’m not in love with Theo.”

Harry leaned forward. “Should I apologize?”

“Do you regret it?” Hermione asked.

“No, but it might have pushed him away. I don’t want to push him away.” Harry set down his cup on the table and pressed his hands into his eyes.

Hermione swallowed, was the universe sending another message to her?

“You should take off all the pressure or expectation of him saying it back, it can be very difficult to express that you love someone, it feels very risky. Just tell him you meant it, but you can’t expect him to say it back.” Hermione sighed, “And we need to get Pansy over here immediately.”

“I think that’s a horrible idea.” Harry blinked at her. “She is not exactly my biggest fan.”

“Yeah, well you have to win her over somehow.” Hermione moved to the fireplace and floo called Pansy. “Pansy, I have a secret you’ll be excited to know!” She sang through the green flames.

The following headlines kept Hermione motivated and focused on her goals to crack open Askaban’s secrets.

Ronald Weasley Campaigns for Safety Laws Regarding Muggleborns

Should Muggleborn’s Be Sponsored by Pureblood Families? Some Say Yes! Exclusive Sit Down Interview With Muggle Born Justin Finch-Fletchley

Askaban to Reassess Visitation Rights

Draco Malfoy is a Dirty Cheater, Astoria Greengrass Declines Interview, ‘I don’t kiss and tell’

Hermione hadn't seen Draco in four days. *He took the fucking bed*. Not only did he take the bed, but he didn't bother replacing it. Meaning, she walked into her bedroom after speaking to Harry and Pansy for two hours to a bedless room.

She could practically hear his arrogant tone, '*well if you're not going to be sleeping with me you don't get to sleep at all.*'

She continued working, but she was becoming frustrated. Research on Askaban's financial reports was so incredibly slow to get access to in a legal manner and her requests to visit Azkaban were denied three times already. Finally, she had Theo pull some strings for her to get paperwork pushed through, but he couldn't do anything about the visitation request.

When she finally did see Draco it was by accident. She walked out of her favorite study room at Malfoy manor, coincidentally it happened to be right across the hall from Draco's teenage room. They both walked out at the same time. She froze in place at the unexpected interaction. Draco's eyes dragged down her body with a look so predatorial she shivered. He was the big bad snake and she was a shivering mouse. He gave her a wolfish grin as he sauntered away. There seemed to be a beast that awakened inside him. Or maybe it was always there and she only saw the side he wanted to show her. Unfortunately she liked this side of him too.

After talking Harry through his feelings about Theo, Hermione had become less insistent that Draco express his feelings for her, but she was too stubborn to say anything to him and without him around her all the time she was doing a lot more research. Research on things she never imagined like courtships and soulmates.

Two days later when she was visiting Theo's library at Nott manor she was reaching for a book when Draco's hand clamped over her mouth and the other grabbed both her wrists, he cast a muffalito followed by a sticking charm over her. *The fucking nerve of him.*

"Hi darling," His arm wound around her body, pulling her close. She squirmed against him, her ass brushing his against his hips. "While you struggle underneath me, I'm going to tell you what I've been up to the last few days." He brushed his nose along the shell of her neck. "I've been considering the truth of my feelings. I started to seriously come undone over how I felt about you. I was stressed out trying to find the right words that wouldn't make you run away from me, because truly Hermione, I'll give you anything you want, but it was agonizing."

His hand moved underneath her shirt and over her breasts, yanking her bra cup down, gaining access to her bare skin. She was gasping into the book shelf, his other hand splayed against her stomach moving under the waistband of her leggings, then underneath her knickers. He cupped her and she jerked her hips. Gods she missed being in his arms. If he hadn't silenced her, maybe she would have called a truce, but he didn't deserve it now.

"Then I started considering everything I knew about you. That's when I realized baby, you're afraid of telling me the truth too." He slid across her slit. "First, you became friends with my friends, then you started volunteering for all of my mother's charities. All of them Hermione. How did I not realize the connection before I don't know. Maybe it was a coincidence, sure, but the more I considered it, the more it didn't seem like such a coincidence after all. Then

there's the fact that you know where I live, you live rather close to me baby, I lived in my flat first. Which begs the question...Was moving close to me a happy accident? Or did you move close to me on purpose? I'm starting to think you've been thinking about me for a long time." He whispered, still teasing her slit, the moisture pooling against his fingers, her legs spread further apart on their own accord. "Is that a confirmation Hermione? How long have I been on your mind?"

No matter what she did he'd take it as confirmation and she was not ready for this conversation, not that she could even speak at the moment.

Had she subconsciously centered her life around Draco Malfoy?

No, most of it was a series of very conscious decisions that she'd layered through the lens of denial, justification, and practicality. She was too self aware for her subconscious to be that in control. She was certain he knew that too.

He kissed her cheek. "And then I found your magical signature *all over* my bedroom at the manor. And that made me wonder, how many times have you gone inside, darling? How many times have you touched yourself in my bed? How many times did you steal my clothing?" She was shocked into silence, no muffalito needed. *Okay, she didn't think he'd catch on that fast.* That's when his fingers dipped inside her. *Fuck,* she silently yelled out. "I bet you have other secrets too." His face was pressed against her ear, his breath coasting down her cheeks. His hand pulled away and shoved her pants down, the cool air of the library tickled her thighs and raised goosebumps on her flesh. His belt buckle snapped and then he was inside of her thrusting hard and fast. "You've been a bad girl Hermione." He nibbled on her ear. A very bad girl." True, she'd lied a few times, but who cares, when this was the punishment?

His thumb circled her nipple. His body rocked into hers with a steady rhythm, it was rough like in her hallway, and she enjoyed it immensely. She'd jinx the fuck out of him after this for sneaking up on her, but she chased the pleasure he was giving her. His finger began swirling around her clit. She was so close. She was a dripping mess. Her breathing became choppy and she ground against him. "Are you close, baby?" She leaned into him, nodding. He thrusted harder and he came before her, his cock twitched hard, shooting against her core. She loved the feel of him inside her. She was right behind him, moving vigorously as the momentum began to unfold and-

He pulled out abruptly ceasing her orgasm like a rug being pulled underneath her feet. She gasped loudly. "Bad girls don't get to come."

Not that he could hear, but she began protesting immediately, arching her back searching for pressure, any kind of friction for her pulsing clit. His body moved away from hers entirely, leaving her empty and throbbing. He zipped his pants and refastened his belt, the sound of it making her skin hot and itchy. Leaning into her space from behind, he said, "I'll leave you just how I like you," He pressed a kiss to her temple. "Flushed, needy, and full of my cum. If you want to talk about the truth darling, you better be prepared to share your own as well."

He walked away, leaving her in the library stuck to a bookshelf with her pants around her knees. It was five minutes before the sticking charm wore off. She was tempted to march into

his flat and hex all his things, but no, the best revenge was served psychologically.

Hermione owled her friends telling them she was hiding away for a while. She turned off her floo completely and cast anti-apparition wards around her house so that no one could apparate inside. She reconfigured several wards that Draco had cast, layering them and pushing the boundaries of the runic stones' stability. She owled Blaise to tell him she'd be pushing through her research and wanted peace and quiet since library's seemed to be unsafe. He wouldn't understand the reference, but Draco would surely get the message.

Draco tried to get past her wards two days later and he couldn't. Hermione cackled in satisfaction, watching him walk away like he forgot where he was, wobbling legs making him unsteady. Six days after that she was beginning to get tired from all the upkeep of the wards, re-warding her home every three hours was exhausting and it surely wouldn't be a long term solution, but revenge did feel good. She wasn't ready to discuss things she kept secret and he was being equally stubborn. The downtime however really helped her examine the public financial records of Azkaban. Hermione could make the safe assumption that someone or a group of people based on the amount of pathways the money was taking, was being laundered through the prison and possibly through the ministry specifically through the DMLE. No wonder her request for visiting under educational purposes was being denied. Which also meant a trip to Askaban was more necessary than ever. There was one angle she hadn't tried yet and that would require to leave her house.

Admittedly she was becoming a bit stir crazy and her house was worryingly low on food. Her tunnel vision for working allowed the first few days to fly by, but the last two days were proving a bit harder to get through, but she wasn't giving in just yet. She could manage a few more days. She owled Narcissa to schedule a tea. And then owled Theo and Pansy too. And then just for a bit more fun she owled one more person.

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Draco was unraveling. His clever, perfect, beautiful, stubborn witch hit him where it hurt.

The first day she'd locked herself in her house he thought it was amusing, cute even. He watched her work in the house on surveillance cameras, bustling away in anxious movements around her flat, changing the wards and closing the floo. That night he watched her grab her vibrator from the night stand and she walked into the bathroom with a sexy smirk on her face. *Why hadn't he installed cameras there?* That was a frustrating oversight he'd correct soon, but he was still enjoying their little game. He'd realized that his own obsession with his witch had stopped him from considering how she thought of him and that had been a very enlightening path to pursue. His witch was hiding her own feelings very carefully. He decided he would give her the space she asked for and apologize for his impatience.

That was until she dismantled the cameras.

That was when his control started to fracture. He missed her skin, he missed the taste of her mouth, and the smell of her neck and hair. He missed her laugh, and her breathy moans, all her questions, and the curious wrinkle of her nose when she was intrigued about a conversation topic. But none of those things made him feel as unhinged as he did now. What caused him to feel like he was losing control faster than a runaway train hijacked by drunken gnomes was that he couldn't *see* her. That was his lifeline. That's what kept him grounded; watching her. *Seeing her live*.

He'd gone days without seeing her in the past many times. Despite how utterly enamored he was with her, he did actually have a job that he enjoyed. Even after they became a couple, he spent time away from her, but there were ways that dulled the need to see her. He could hear her voice over the phone, see her in the pictures she sent him, and of course watch her over the cameras as she slept.

It was only on day two of not seeing her that made him attempt to tear through the wards. Her brilliance and cleverness never bothered him, in fact it only made her more attractive, more desirable, but that day he despised her intelligence. He'd get through one layer of wards just to be turned around with wild confusion, ending up back in his sitting room. He'd tried again and endured a jelly-legs jinx for three hours. *Okay, so that wasn't going to work*.

He took a breath and decided he would play along. He wanted to be patient with her after all and his witch gave him the opportunity to practice patience. The admiration and respect he felt for her and her impressive magical skill outweighed his need to see her. She would come out eventually and it would be fine, he reassured himself.

He cleared his schedule and began intently watching her flat for movement.

By day four he wanted to pull his hair out. Things were not fine. He needed to see her, he needed to lay his eyes on her. Any sign of life, any sign of his witch would help ease the ache in his chest. A fucking glimpse of her fingernail would suffice. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Let me see you, darling. Let me see you*. He mentally pleaded with her. He knew she was in there because he had wards set up to notify him if she'd left. They all claimed she was breathing, but it was hard to believe without seeing her face.

By day six he regretted not kidnapping her when he had the chance. He wanted to rip the skin off his bones to stop the ache in his body. Not seeing her was like sipping on poison, he couldn't eat, he couldn't sleep, and he felt like he was dying a slow, painful death. She needed to be punished for this asinine behavior.

Day eight he almost passed out when he saw an owl leave her window. *Finally a sign that she was indeed alive!* But that was it and the disappointment of not seeing her crashed into him like a rogue wave and he was drowning in the aftermath.

But on day nine when he watched Cormac McLaggen stroll up to her door, Draco was excited to watch the prick be spun around in confusion and jinxed into oblivion, but as he walked inside her flat with perfect ease, Draco was murderous.

His eyes only left the front to check for signs of movement in the windows. He could see absolutely nothing and he was seething with white-hot rage.

Two hours went by and he considered blowing up the flat entirely. He was confident that he could spare her life.

Another hour went by and he was sweating with blistering anger, pacing a worn path in his carpet.

He wasn't worried she was fucking McLaggen. *Not at all.*

His witch was more loyal than that. She was gryffindor to a fault. And he knew, to some extent, how she felt about him. All the hexes in his room, all of his missing clothes, plus that look in her eyes when they were making love or even when they were arguing was not something she could fake.

No, he was upset because the first person to have seen her in nine fucking days was not Pansy or Theo or Harry or even fucking Weasley, but Cormac McLaggen...The man who kept winking at her and trying to catch her eye anytime they were in the same room.

His jealousy was malignant, festering and spreading with every passing second McLaggen spent inside her flat. The bastard was looking at his beautiful witch, looking into her perfect amber eyes, watching her smile, listening to her laugh, and she probably shook his hand too.

*He was touching his witch* . Draco hadn't been able to do any of those things in nine fucking days. The image of them laughing together or doing whatever the fuck took three hours, 42 mintues and twelve seconds, was driving him to the point of madness. If McLaggen had so much as spoken one rude word to her, Draco would carve out his tongue with gratitude.

He pulled back on the temptation to use dark magic to get his witch out of her flat and into his arms. Instead he waited and watched and calculated his plan. His blazing anger had cooled over into icy determination. Hermione was fucking with him, because he fucked with her. And this time his payback would be so over the top, she'd regret hiding from him. She had no clue how dramatic he could be.

McLaggen finally left after four hours, ten minutes, and eighteen seconds. And Draco still hadn't even glimpsed Hermione's face.

He was tempted to follow McLaggen down the street, drag him into an alley and rip out all his memories from his mind so Draco could finally fucking view her face again, but Instead, he stayed put and kept watching her flat. He waited for the right moment to tear through those wards.

This was growth, this was maturity. He was so fucking proud of his patience.

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Hermione emerged on day ten with a smile on her face. The fresh air felt incredible. After surviving on biscuits, tea, and a few questionable vegetables in her fridge, her first stop was to Draco's restaurant. Yes, she was still fucking with him. If he wanted to play mind games she would too. She ate a leisurely long lunch and when a glass of red wine came 'on the house' from her waitress a shiver wound down her spine. He was watching her, of course he was. This had to be a warning of some kind, she was sure of it. She still tested the wine for poison just in case he was going to make her pass out face first into her plate of crispy chips, then she enjoyed every last drop. When she asked for her check the waitress replied, "The owner is a huge fan of your books. He told me to tell you thank you for all the inspiration your work has given him and lunch is on the house as well."

Hermione swallowed, "That's quite nice."

"He asked for your autograph." She handed her a copy of *Sweet Seduction*. One of her first muggle romance novels. Hermione glanced around the restaurant. She couldn't see him, but that didn't mean he couldn't see her. She signed it with a loopy flourish.

After her lunch she apparated to Malfoy manor.

Pansy and Theo were in the sitting room whispering conspiratorially to each other over cups of tea. They straightened as she approached.

"Hello." Hermione sat with a sigh.

"She lives!" Pansy snapped.

"Narcissa will be here in fifteen minutes and if you don't want us to ask about Draco in front of her then you need to spill your guts." Theo said.

"Immediately." Pansy added.

"There's nothing to tell." Hermione shrugged.

Pansy's eye roll was strong enough to break the fine china before them. "We're not idiots, you know. What are you two fighting about?"

Hermione pursed her lips. "He's being a stubborn asshole."

"And you're being?" Theo leaned in, eyebrow arched.

"Perfectly understandable considering his attitude."

"Are you still sleeping together?" Theo asked.

"The non-platonic kind." Pansy said dryly.

"Occasionally." She swallowed. She'd relived that moment in the library more times than she'd care to admit.

“A bit of hate fucking never hurt anyone.” Theo shrugged. Hermione’s cheeks pinked at his words.

Pansy sighed. “Draco has been insufferable. So please fix him already.”

“He’s the problem. If he’d communicate how he felt, this would all be over.”

“Are you also communicating how you feel?” Theo’s knowing tone sent a shard indignation down her spine.

“I’m waiting for him to go first.” Hermione realized how childish it sounded as she said it.

“Have you finished writing your courting contract at least?” Pansy asked before sipping her tea.

“No.” Hermione exhaled.

“So are you broken up?”

“No. Of course not.” Hermione’s heart beat faster at the thought of not having Draco in her life. She was upset and maybe she’d have to shove veritas serum down his throat to get the truth out of him, but she didn’t want him to be gone forever. Had she pushed things too far?

“Then what’s the real issue?” Theo shook his head.

“Nothing, I just- I’m just overwhelmed by all of his-”

Pansy’s eyes widened, her hand flying to her mouth with a small elegant gasp. Theo looked between the two witches brow furrowed. Pansy whispered into his ear before his eyes went owlish and his mouth fell open. “No fucking way.” Theo’s eyes began to water.

Hermione’s back teeth clenched. “I’m right in front of you.”

Theo looped his arm into Pansy’s and their head’s fell together as they marveled at her.

“Our two idiots are in love.” Theo murmured.

The butterflies in Hermione’s stomach began fluttering and she squashed them with an iron fist.

“You can’t fall in love with someone after two months of courting.” Hermione said. “It’s not logical.”

Pansy rolled her eyes again. “Love is not logical. Love is its own force of nature. Wasn’t love the reason Potter was able to defeat the dark lord?”

Theo swallowed with a sigh, “Harry is quite good at making love.”

Pansy wrinkled her nose, “That’s not what I said.”

Narcissa walked in and Hermione remembered the reason she'd come and she didn't want the two nosy friends of hers to ask questions before they all gossiped over tea.

"Can I speak to you privately?" Hermione asked. "Before we have tea." Narcissa nodded and Hermione cast a silencing charm over them as she made her request. Narcissa agreed readily and Hermione released a sigh of relief.

Once tea was served Pansy began. "So I saw Daphne and Astoria two days ago while Daphne was wedding dress shopping. Let me tell you about the monstrosity of this dress she tried on."

"Did you happen to ask Astoria how she liked sucking Draco's face?" Hermione snapped.

Two hours later Hermione was feeling refreshed and ready to spend an evening working before winding down with a movie and dinner, but as soon as she stepped into her flat she knew something was off. Her flat was *too* quiet. She gripped her wand and cast a detection spell. A highly advanced silencing charm had been cast over her entire house. Her pulse picked up as she set her bag down. She silenced her own footsteps and crept further into the dining room and then slowly into her kitchen, peeking her head around the corner.

When she turned around, Draco stood before her, a wicked grin on his face.

"Hello darling." It was his only warning before he grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder.

Chapter 26

“Locomotor Mortis.” Hermione flicked her wand at Draco's legs. Nothing happened.

“Confundo.” She tried again. His mocking laugh made her try something a bit more sinister.
“Calvorio.”

He scoffed. “Really? A hair loss curse? Now that's actually cruel.”

“And you're being a perfect gentlemen.” She resigned to pounding her fists on his back. “Put me down.”

“Gladly.” He tossed her on the bed and quick as a snitch his was wand out. Her hands and feet stuck to the bed instantly. He snatched her wand, tossing it over his shoulder and it disappeared into thin air.

He sat beside her, leaning over her face. His grey gaze was a bonfire, blazing with an intense desperation. A similar swirl was in her own body. This was the longest they'd been apart since restarting whatever their relationship was. This was also the longest they'd gone without talking in some form or another and he hadn't been this close to her since the library and even then, it was from behind. His eyes scanned her face, soaking in every one of her features. He'd missed her.

“Are you kidding me?” Hermione said quietly, trying to breathe normally. “That sticky residue was stuck on my wrists for three days. If you get it in my hair I'll-”

“Ten fucking days.” His breath, that familiar sweet muggle mint, fanned across her lips and they parted instantly. She knew he'd be mad that she'd hidden from him. He stalked her, he obviously liked watching her. It only seemed obvious to take it away. And he *was* mad, but there were other emotions in his eyes and in the lines of his face, anger and desperation and lust. The one that made her stomach flip, however, was the vulnerability that lingered in the mixture.

She swallowed as they held a charged stare for several long moments. Hermione was breathing, she knew that her body was taking breaths, but it was also like she couldn't quite get her body to make the full physiological exchange in her blood cells to give her enough oxygen. Her heart raced in her chest in a frantic attempt to create more of it. He took up so much space. Physically and emotionally. In her mind and in her heart. It had been such a long ten days...her eyes dropped to his lips and he smirked and his emotions faded as quickly they came. That arrogant mask covered up whatever he couldn't previously hide.

He spoke, in a raspy whisper, just a thread of space between their mouths. “Did you miss me?”

“No.” Hermione didn't try to sound convincing, but she wasn't going to admit she missed him, not yet. Not when he had her stuck to her bed. Not when her attempt at hiding was not

just revenge for leaving her hot and bothered in Theo's library, but also as a punishment for not talking to her. And also for taking the fucking bed and wine.

His hand cupped her face. "You want the truth while telling such obvious lies." He tisked, as if reading her mind. His thumb brushed over her cheek bone and she refused to lean into his touch, but her eyes fluttered traitorously anyway. His hand pulled away and he grabbed one of her wrists tied it to the corner of her bed with a physical restraint. She jerked her hand as soon as he moved away, but she couldn't get very far. Why did that turn her on? Giving up her control and consent should be setting off alarm bells, but it only made her panties moisten. Her body was a traitorous bitch. She was doing the right thing, by protecting the only organ that mattered. *Her heart*. She couldn't tell the truth without his first. She couldn't risk being ripped apart by him.

"Is this on your list?" She breathed. "Tying me up against my will?"

He arched his brow. "You're awfully compliant for someone being 'tied up against their will'." He mocked her condescendingly. He was really being an asshole on purpose right now. He wasn't holding back.

Hermione's pulse quickened as he sat down next to her other arm. "Do you want me to struggle?"

His eyes heated, "I like seeing you get riled up." He shook his head as he tied her other hand. "Gods this bed is shit."

Hermione ignored the jab, she wouldn't admit that his bed was better, not yet. He did the same to her legs and then stood at the foot of her bed gazing over her spread eagle body. "You're such a beautiful thing tied up like this." He exhaled slowly. He swished his wand and all her clothes disappeared. A shiver erupted against her skin and her nipples hardened. "Even better." He licked his bottom lip. "Would you like to know what's on tonight's agenda?"

"I'll tell you what should be on the agenda. We should be talking. You should be telling me your secrets." Hermione replied.

"Incorrect." A devilish grin appeared on his face. "Over the next four hours, ten minutes, and eighteen seconds you'll have ten orgasms for me. One for every day you hid yourself away from me."

"That's an oddly specific amount of time." Hermione ignored the flush of heat that ran down the sides of her body. He continued to smile at her. So this was her punishment for Mclaggen? Orgasms? She huffed a laugh. "That sounds horrible Draco. I'm shaking with fear." His grin widened further and godsdamned if it didn't punch her in the gut. She missed him so much she could feel it physically, like a throbbing bruise in the center of her chest.

"Remember that when you're begging to come and then again when you're begging me to stop." His grin became instantly irritating.

"You've been stalking me for years Draco." She sounded too breathy to sound as bold as she wanted to sound. Over the last ten days Hermione had decided she needed to call him what he was. Call him out for watching her for years, buying a restaurant, and who knows what else, without ever speaking to her. Now after they've spent the last couple of months fucking each other like crazy, he couldn't talk about his actual feelings. "What's the difference between you and the other stalkers I have, huh? It seems like you owe me at least that bit of information."

It was hard to feel as accusatory as she wanted to be, with her being tied up and nude, but the effect hit nonetheless. She could see it in his eyes the way they flared, the fear of her getting closer to his truth. A muscle in his jaw feathered as he began crawling over her until he straddled her. The power dynamic of the whole scenario turned her on, but there was something extra sexy about her being completely naked and him being fully clothed. It was the vulnerability though that had her anxiety spiking. He made her feel too much and she'd spent the last five years teaching herself how to not feel too much. She liked her emotions in bite sized pieces that she could snack on, not the extra large serving size she got shoved down her throat every time she was with Draco.

Draco placed his palms on either side of her face and leaned down close to her ear. "There are only two differences, my beautiful girl, the first one is the obvious fact that I'd never, ever harm you and the second is that you like it when it's me." His nose brushed against the side of her face and he placed a tender kiss on her temple. She forced her body to remain completely still. "And that's pretty much it." He said, nonchalantly. Right. Cool. He was legitimately a stalker. He didn't try to deny it, which was a good thing, right? He was being honest. An honest stalker, how cute. He rolled off of her in a quick movement and then tugged off his black tie, winding it around her eyes, pulling tight.

"What are you doing now?" She yelled. He ignored her, opting for a feather-light kiss to her lips that left her annoyed and wanting more. A few seconds later she heard the door close.

Did he just leave her in here? He was toying with her like a cat with its food.

Immediately, she tried to take the ropes off, several minutes went by, but she was really, truly, stuck.

"Accio wand." She yelled. "Accio wand!" *Nothing.*

"Alohomora." *Nothing.*

Did he somehow ban magic? She must have annoyed him so much with her wards that he had to start showing off his own magical skills. The bed creaked as she twisted or was it the door opening? She couldn't see a damn thing. The anticipation of his return started to make her skin buzz. She squirmed as her breath quickened. The cool air against her core sent a flush through her body. *Four hours, ten minutes, and eighteen seconds.*

Would he make her wait for hours? She had no doubt that Malfoy could make her orgasm ten times rapidly. Probably in such a short time span that he *could* make her wait hours for his return.

Ten times. Fuck.

A spiky, tingling sensation twisted through her chest, through her stomach and in between her legs, settling there with a wave of hot moisture. She needed to ground herself, she needed a sense of time. It had already been roughly five to seven minutes. Or maybe ten? She inhaled deeply, trying to relax her rapidly beating heart and began counting. *One. Two. Three. Four...* Hermione made it to a hundred and forty three before she let out a frustrated groan, “Fuck you!” She laid there breathing hard, frustration and anxiety intertwining inside her like twisting vines against an old home, they were growing thick and overwhelming.

Draco was right and she hated it. She liked it when it was him. There were several people watching her. Stalking her. The brotherhood or higher ups in the ministry or crazy blood purists, she didn’t know, but there were several of them out there waiting to attack her. Draco had been watching her too. Fantasizing about taking her against her will. *And she liked it when it was him.*

The letters that were sitting in a file in her closet. There were the threats, but there were also letters of longing, ones of sexual desire. Had he written some of those? Her suspicions were leaning towards yes. Draco stalked her. Draco watched her without her permission. He wrote to her and crossed so many boundaries that *should* make her sick, because it *did* make her sick when it was anyone else. If it had been Harry, or Ron, or even Theo or Pansy, she’d be horrified, but when it came to Draco it felt different. *It was* different. *Why? Why was it different with him?* Why could he be such a creep, and she could still want him? The violations of privacy were annoying and frustrating, and sometimes overbearing, but it also made her feel adored. Cared for. *Seen.*

And That didn’t seem normal, that seemed crazy. *And she wasn’t crazy.*

“Draco!” She yelled as she arched her back, twisting and yanking harder on the restraints. She kicked and thrashed against them for a long time. So long she was sweating. When was the last time she put on deodorant? *Shit.* He was such a bastard for leaving her like this. She was breathing even harder from all her maneuvering and the blend of so many emotions and unwanted revelations that she let out a scream, yanking on the ropes. Both restraints around her wrists shifted slightly, giving her more length. Thank fucking Merlin. *She was finally making progress.* If she could just figure out where he hid her wand, she could start breaking down the wards that prevented her from using her magic.

Perhaps she’d be untied before Draco came back and she could attack *him*. Tying Draco up and forcing him to watch her use her vibrator a few times without being able to touch her would be a good punishment. She’d kick him out of the apartment with a nice babbling curse as a parting gift. She rolled sideways in an effort to get her hands in front of her so she could take the tie off her face, she needed to see. Her arms twisted above her head and she moved onto her belly. Then she began wiggling her body back and forth, digging her knees into the bed, but her knees kept slipping against her comforter and she was getting tired. She gripped the restraints for leverage, pulling hard as she dug her knees into the bedding.

“Don’t hurt yourself darling, you’re starting to look exhausted and we haven’t even started yet.” Draco’s low, deep voice felt like physical blow to her body. She fell flat on her face, losing all of her momentum.

"How long have you been here?" She demanded, her aggravation was making her even hotter than she already was.

"I've been here the whole time and you've put on quite the show. I could watch you all night." She could hear his smug expression. *The whole time!* He was enjoying watching her struggle. This was certainly the punishment he intended, not just orgasms, but him being in control again.

"You're an asshole." She twisted her head sideways, her upper arms shifted against the fabric around her eyes and she managed to pull it down slightly with the pressure of her arm.

The room was dark but she could see some candles, emitting a soft warm glow as shadows danced along the walls. It was almost...romantic or eerie.

"And you're an annoying brat." He replied. "I planned to start worshiping you from the front of your body, but your backside is just as pretty." His fingertips dragged alongside the inner part of her ankle.

"I'm all sweaty now," she protested, wiggling at his touch in an effort to move away from him. It obviously was useless, but she was suddenly self conscious of every part of her body. The sweat against her skin, the smell of her armpits and crotch, her matted hair from wrestling with the restraints in the bed. She must look like a rapid animal and smell like one too. When was the last time she shaved her freaking legs? Her breath came out in hot puffs and it certainly didn't smell like his sweet minty breath.

"Good observation." His fingers moved along her inner leg, grazing over her skin with a delicate touch. Such a contrast to their last two *encounters*. Draco's fingers went over her thigh and bum, up her spine, over her shoulder and arm. She squirmed. "That tickles." Hermione said, trying to hold back her laugh. The combination of things she was feeling right now was hard to compartmentalize. "Let me at least take a shower. I've been gone all day."

His voice was like crushed velvet, soft and rough at the same time. "And I can't wait to taste you." Her cheeks flushed and a spiky heat crawled down her spine like a dancing spider making its way down its web. He repeated the same process over her other leg, trailing gentle fingers tenderly over her thigh, her ribs and shoulder blade and up her arm. He was touching every part of her. Like he was making sure she was in one piece and that she was real. It made those swirling emotions inside her chest squeeze hard. She squirmed again. "How long has it been?" She asked.

"Time is an illusion," he said farther away from her this time. She tried twisting around, but apparently the restraints had shortened in length again. Then it dawned on her...he had been watching her struggle. He was controlling the restraints. Asshole. The weight on the bed shifted by her feet. Her legs were spread wide and she was face down in the bed. A pulsing heat was building rapidly there, especially knowing he was staring at her core and ass.

Hermione had a feeling Draco had no intention of making her come anytime soon and for some reason that made the throbbing inside her intensify. He had her tied up and she knew he would take his time, he preferred slow. *Fuck.* The butterflies in her stomach began to take

flight. She squirmed again, shifting back and forth, she couldn't sit still, there was too much happening inside her body. "Fuck." he breathed, just above a whisper. His hands roamed over her ass and down her thighs. "You're so fucking beautiful."

"Hmmm. Gods, I missed you." He said against her skin, a hand moved up and down her spine. "It's okay." He whispered between kisses on her bum. "Relax, baby. Just relax." His tone was soft and sickly sweet. Another wide thick of his tongue had her exhaling hard. "It's going to be a long night." He kissed lower where her ass met her thighs, she squeezed her eyes shut. Goosebumps erupted across her skin as he moved, his hands caressed her leg and his breath tickled her calf as he licked, sucked, and kissed her there. An involuntary huff of breath came out of her when he kissed her ankle and then the arch of foot. He lifted her leg, bending it at the knee as he kissed her toes. A tickling sensation along with erotic pleasure wound through her as he sucked on them. "Are you enjoying yourself yet?" His lips repeated his ministrations down the opposite side, licking, sucking and kissing every part of her leg. She ignored his question. Her breathing was too erratic to answer and her body was tensing and twitching at all the licks and kisses. She *was* enjoying herself, but she wasn't exactly relaxed and she wouldn't admit either to him yet, it was just a big swirl of too many things to untangle, she could barely explain her feelings to herself. Ten days had been a long time and her stubbornness and anger helped her ride through those days, but now, now all the other emotions were driving to surface. The minute he threw her over his shoulder it felt different. No one touched her like he did and she'd be a fool not to relish in every moment of it. For all she knew he'd disappear for twenty days just to prove a point, but she wouldn't give in too easily. Not yet. Like he said, he liked her riled up and she liked it when he riled her up.

Her thoughts were effectively cut off when she felt his warm breath against her pussy. Wetness pooled heavily as he inhaled deeply and she let out an involuntary moan. "That's a good girl," he whispered.

"Are you speaking to me or my cunt?" She asked breathlessly. He chuckled in response, rich and warm, but instead of responding he pressed a soft kiss at the small space between her asshole and her entrance. A very, very soft one. It was almost more breath than lips. Then he placed another and another. Her body became softer, melting like an ice lolly in the hot sun. She leaned into the mattress as he continued to press warm, breathy kisses on her skin. He moaned and it sent a teasing vibration against her body, skating against her skin in sharp swirls. Her core clenched hard and her thighs jerked involuntarily towards him, trying and failing to press her pussy into his face. "Always so eager, my girl." His mouth moved over her ass again, kissing all over her warm skin. He moved up her spine, licking and then sucking hard. She realized now that he was leaving his mark on her skin like an animal marking his territory. He was jealous. Hermione also realized she liked jealous Draco.

She could feel him over her, he was on all fours above her as he pressed kisses into her shoulder and neck. She moaned freely now as he licked and sucked her there. He moved her hair to the other side doing the same. Then he wound her hair around his hand and pulled her head back. "Ten days," he huffed, his tone full of thick agitation. "Ten fucking days." He pressed a hard kiss to her mouth, too quick for her to kiss him back. Gods it had been so long since they'd had a proper kiss. He held still for a moment, waiting or hesitating, she didn't know. If he was waiting for her to apologize for hiding she wasn't going to.

And as if realizing that he let her hair go, moved off her and flipped her body over so quickly and suddenly the movement made her dizzy. It took several moments to orient herself. He pulled the tie away from her eyes and she could finally see the room. Candles were everywhere along the perimeter of the room. And Draco stood at the end of the bed again... gods, he was slowly unbuttoning his black shirt. He slipped it off, not taking his eyes off of her, hard rippling muscles and sprawling tattoos making her swallow hard. Her breath hitched as he tugged off his belt, then slid down his pants...

He was so gorgeous it was hard to believe he was real, it was almost too much.

"Are you going to perform some kind of ritual on me?" She said, glancing around the room at the candles.

"Yes, this bed is my altar and you are my goddess." His heated gaze made her hips shift. "I told you I'd be worshiping you."

"You take that word quite literally." She huffed.

He smirked. "You have no idea." He began at her toes this time, kissing the top of her foot, her ankle, the hard line of her shinbone, the inside of her knee. He sucked hard there, making her gasp at the sensation. He worked his way up to her hip bone before repeating the process on the other leg. Then he kissed her to the top of her pussy, licking across her pelvis and along the planes of her stomach. All of it was slow and deliberate, he wasn't pecking her body with quick kisses, he was kissing her body as if they were her lips. Open mouth and wet. Kissing her everywhere as if everywhere mattered just as much as her lips. When he kissed over her ribs, she was breathing short huffs of air out of her nose, soaking in his touches. He sucked all over her breasts and her nipples, leaving angry marks in his wake. She let out a loud breathy moan, he spent so much time on her breasts that she arched her hips, digging her heels into the bed. The throbbing that had been slowly building in between her legs doubled.

"Oh fuck," she gasped. His mouth didn't stop moving and she was rocking her hips into the air. He wasn't even close to her, she didn't know why her body was humping the air. He licked up her neck, sucking hard on her pulse point. He laid at an angle, his bare chest on top of hers, but the rest of his body was to the side of her and the huff of frustration she let out made him smile. Her frustration made him happy. The prick.

"Is there something you want?" His hand cupped her face and his words were sweet, but his expression was anything but.

"Let me touch you." She said, yanking on the restraints. "Please. Please let me touch you."

"No." The restraints tightened after he spoke and she gasped. Or maybe she shrieked a bit. He wound one arm around her neck, tugging her to his face. He kissed her hard. Dominating the kiss in every way. *I'm in charge, I'm in charge.* His lips said.

And she let him. She let him be in charge. Giving in and becoming pliant under his mouth, listening to him. Letting his form of communication soothe her worries about the future.

His aggressive nips at her lips told her he was still frustrated by their arguments. Then gradually his kisses became soft feather-like, they were brushing each other's mouths together, where it was more like they exchanged breaths instead of kisses. She told herself that was his apology for being an asshole. Then those turned into long, fifthly, wet kisses where their tongues practically went down each other's throats. Those told her he'd fuck her for her brattiness *and* because he missed her.

Hermione lost herself in him and they kissed for a *long* time. She didn't have a great sense of the time, but it had to have been over an hour of kissing him. Her lips were swollen and sore and she still wasn't tired of it. Her hands stayed above her head and for a long time all he did was hold her face controlling the kiss and angle of her mouth, but towards the end of their longest snogging session to date, his hands began to roam freely, tugging at her nipples, moving down the side of her body, gripping her ass. She moaned into his mouth as his fingers stroked her slit. "So wet and ready for my cock." Her hips thrust upwards but he moved his hand away with a smile. "My pathetic baby, do you want me to fuck you already?" His condescending tone only made her more turned on. He leaned over her breast, his tongue darting out licking her nipple as two of his fingers slid slowly inside her again. "Well, you'll have to a good girl and earn it." He grinned. She moaned loudly as his fingers went deep, curling as they began pumping inside of her.

"My perfect little slut." He said as his teeth scraped against her nipple. She began moving with his hand. She let her eyes close as the coiling heat began pulsing hard, she was so close. So ready to come, her toy was never enough compared to him. "Good girl." He rasped against her neck. "Are you going to come for me?"

She nodded and moaned. "Yes" Then she gasped, "What the hell!" He didn't bother answering her, as his mouth continued moving down her neck, sucking and kissing her slowly as his fingers stopped moving inside her, effectively stopping her orgasm. They were still inside her, but he didn't move. "Draco!" She whimpered.

"You haven't earned coming yet either." He said simply, as pulled his fingers out and stuck them into his mouth. "But I?" He closed his eyes, licking his lips. "I have earned that pussy."

His face was between her legs and she knew that that orgasm would not come for a long time. His tongue was so slow. Meticulously slow. Deliciously slow. Irritatingly slow. Hermione couldn't decide if she liked being sucked like a lolly with no end in sight. He was going so slow that she wasn't close to coming, but the experience itself was unreal. There was no place around her pussy he hadn't licked or kissed her. Every lick of his tongue a felt incredible. It was clear though that he wasn't doing this for her. That was something else he was telling her without words. He was eating her for himself and himself alone. Draco was a generous lover, but this moment was for his own pleasure. Or perhaps that's what this whole night was. He told her that the more she came the better it was for him. That he made her come for selfish reasons. It was hard to believe at the time but maybe this was him showing her how selfish he could be in both ways, making her come was selfish, but not making her come and simply enjoying her body, *using her body*, was also selfish.

He lapped her up, never picking up speed but slowly the budding heat began building again anyway. His hands gripped her thighs, keeping her spread open.

Without warning he shoved her knees up, pressing her legs wide. He spit on her asshole, before bending back down. Then he was eating her ass. She cried out at the sensation. He was vigorous down there. Not slow at all. He was rough as he licked her, pressing hard into her body, pressing her thighs apart. *Fucking hell.* That building heat spread through her body rapidly . It was like being slapped or splashed with cold water. It was so sharp and fast that it was hard to adjust to. Two of his fingers slid into cunt and she moaned so loudly she was grateful for those silencing wards he'd wrapped her house in. The thought that no one would hear her being as loud as she wanted to be relaxed something inside her, something deep inside her that she didn't know she was still holding onto. Draco understood her. He knew she wouldn't relax fully if she couldn't be loud and being loud was still uncomfortable for her. She was still self conscious of it. But the wards he used were not just basic silencing charms that wore thin after an hour, these were the kind that wouldn't allow sound to penetrate for hours, days if done correctly. And it was that intimate part of it that made her orgasm so volatile. She screamed his name, but he didn't stop even after the initial waves crashed into her, making her thighs quiver and her hips buck.

His mouth kept licking her asshole, his fingers kept pumping in to her pussy, his thumb slowed, but didn't stop swirling around her clit. She was shaking, with pleasure and slight discomfort. Her body was so sensitive after climaxing, but Draco was telling her that she would come whether she wanted to or not. Ten times he said. *Ten times.* This was him being selfish and it was the best kind of greediness she could imagine. Because she realized with all his tenderness and sweetness, he had held back this part of himself to some extent. He had held back how selfish he wanted to be. Submitting to him was equal parts terrifying and thrilling. And she wanted to feel both. She wanted to feel the fear and the thrill of not having a choice. Of him telling her she had to come. And she *was* coming. It was sharp as glass, cutting into her without permission. Before she was even done gasping from the sensation his mouth was on her pussy again, it was still pulsing when he licked her and she screamed again. This time the sensitivity was borderline painful. "Draco." She breathed. "It's too much." He ignored her. He kept licking, slowly, gently and completely careless of her attempt to give her a break. She breathed hard as he licked her slowly. He wasn't in a rush here, but her body was vibrating like a beehive. It was disorienting and enjoyable and overwhelming. He worked on her clit and then shoved his tongue into her entrance. Tasting her arousal, sucking it up. She had to be so fucking drenched by now. Something inside her was snapping. "Draco." She said, a slight panic on the edge of her voice. "Draco." She was already going to come again. But it felt different. *It was too much.* The sensations were too big, too sharp, too much of everything. "I can't." She cried. He didn't let up, but her restraint on one of her hands untied completely. His wordless magic was beyond impressive. One of his hands moved up, just as his eyes found hers. He wasn't stopping, but he'd offer her an anchor. She reached for him, and they clasped hands, his thumb rubbing soothing circles around her wrist. Their eyes were locked on each other, his gaze was hard, unrelenting, and demanding. Telling her he wouldn't stop until she came again. And she understood on some level that he was demanding something else. Something she couldn't verbalize. And maybe this whole silent communication thing was all in her head, but if it wasn't, it she was understanding him, she could meet him there. So she gave in. To the pleasure so intense she didn't know if it would break her in half or make her whole. But she was also giving herself to him. She came and a tear leaked out of her eye. She was squirting into his mouth and he drank her up, literally swallowing her orgasm as she panted and moaned through the ecstasy. It was like an earthquake, shattering her and rearranging her.

When he finally pulled away, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, with a shaking exhale said, “I’m hungry.” And then he got up and walked out of her room. Hermione threw her head back and closed her eyes. Catching her breath, but not daring to too look at the pieces of her that had been shifted inside of her. Not wanting to register the things he was telling her without his words.

A few minutes had passed before she realized the restraints were gone, unsure when he made them disappear. Her limbs were too weak to move anyway. She let the sensations of those three orgasms run through her. The post orgasm haze was a sort of magic on its own. Perhaps she should research that. That could be her next book. The power of orgasms and if there was any magical science behind it.

“Open your mouth.” Draco sat next to her and she obeyed, without opening her eyes, still too drained and not quite breathing regularly. Chocolate ice cream hit her tongue and sighed, swallowing the sweet cold treat. It was perfect. She opened her mouth again, a silent request for more, but it was his mouth that fell on hers. Instead of kissing her however, a dollop of melted ice cream pressed into her mouth. Her eyes opened, finding grey eyes staring back at her. Instead of swallowing she pressed her tongue back into his mouth. And they kissed that way for a while staring at each other, swapping saliva and melting ice cream. It was intimate in a way that had her chest stirring, expanding that like an inflating balloon. When he pulled away he fed her by spoon again and she was disappointed, but didn’t say anything. He sat next to her for a while feeding her and when she indicated she was done. He handed her a glass of water, she drank half the glass.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?” He asked.

“Probably.” She sat up for the first time and felt normal, albeit a little tired. Her pussy was still sore, but it was a nice soreness.

She moved off the bed towards the bathroom.

“If you run, I’ll come after you.” He said to her back when she approached the doorway. She stilled slightly before continuing to the toilet. He said that to her often enough that she wondered if a part of him wanted her to run so he could chase her.

He didn’t follow her to the bathroom and she knew he was trusting her to decide if she’d stay or run. And she wondered what he wanted more, for her to run or for her to come back. As she washed her hands she concluded that after being gone for ten days perhaps running wouldn’t give him the best impression. So she walked back into her bedroom and she knew she made the right decision based on the sharp breath he exhaled as she entered. He relaxed his shoulders and got off the bed, taking off his briefs, letting his hard cock come out. It hung heavy and thick. “Bend over the bed, hands above your head.” he said. His tone was quiet, but no less commanding. She listened and she felt rather than saw, the relaxation in his body as he slid into her, covering her body with his, intertwining their hands. He was slow. At first only the tip of his cock went inside her. He continued slowly going in and out and inch at a time. He pulled out and slid in without a care in the world. He was relishing in her body and she could feel it like the temperature of a room. She felt his desperation and longing and his own fear. Perhaps they weren’t so different after all. He edged for her a long time, bringing her close and taking it away, pulling all the way out and letting her swollen cunt throb with

need. She began to beg. Beg like she'd never begged before. "Draco, please." she pleaded for the fifth time, gripping the sheets. "Please. Please let me come."

"No." he said again for the fifth time. "You don't deserve it." There was something about trying to earn her orgasms that itched a part of her brain the same way earning high marks in school did. It's not like good grades turned her on, well maybe they did in a way.

"How?" She whimpered as he slid back inside her and he moaned low and rough and she almost came from that. She was so close to coming and yet so far away. It was brutal and wonderful all at once. "How do I deserve it?"

"Be a good girl and admit your mistakes." He whispered into her ear. She arched into him at his words. She wanted to be his good girl. "This bed is shit."

His chuckle was like coming up for air, breathing fully for the first time, like her body finally exchanged oxygen. He'd been so angry with her and hearing him laugh was comforting in a way she didn't know she needed. It was still him. Still her Draco. She liked learning all of the parts of him, she wanted to know everything about him. That was the problem. She wanted to learn from him first. Read him like an encyclopedia to know all his stories and definitions. But it was never like that in real life. In real life people came in small doses and each part you learned also came with more risk. More to lose.

"Say it Hermione. Say you were wrong." His nose brushed the shell of her ear as his fingers found her clit, the closest he'd been to her clit in a long time. He pressed his fingers on it so slightly though it was almost worse than not touching it all. Knowing he was there but without any of the pressure she needed. "I was wrong." She replied quickly. She was so desperate and she didn't try to hid it. "And you were right." She added and then, "And I missed you." and it was those words that had him moving faster, his fingers slowing circling her clit. "Good girl." he whispered. And it was the desperation in his own voice that had her tightening her hands around his. "You'll come twice this way." It wasn't a question. He kissed her neck greedily, seductively, sweetly. How he could be all three at once was beyond her. It was perfect. She came rapidly twice, once almost immediately just from a few touches of his swirling fingers. His cock still pressing in and out of her in long strokes. The second came only a few minutes later as he picked up speed rolling his hips and hitting her deep. She cried out his name.

"Again." He said, pounding into her.

"But-" She gasped.

"Again." He said more forcefully, both with his body and tone. It wasn't a choice either. He was rougher on the third one, letting go of her hands and grabbing her hips, standing up straight, he pinched her nipple and she yelped at the pain and pleasure. "Fuck." he groaned as her walls fluttered in response. "Come." he said, his tone hard and demanding. "Come like the whore you are for me." *Oh fuck.* She came again and this was a slow explosion, like confetti, a burst of the most wonderful pleasure and then it felt like floating or like flying, she wasn't sure. But it felt so good she didn't know how her body could feel it. She didn't know how her body could feel this much pleasure all at once, it was addictive. He pulled out of her, breathing hard. He must be ready to come. How he could last so long didn't make any

biological sense, but Draco was asserting him dominance and control, so it made sense he could control this too. She layed on the bed, with her ass up for several minutes breathing.

“Roll over.” he said breathlessly. She pressed onto her toes and flopped over, her chest heaving.

“What are you doing?” She gasped, sitting up onto her elbows. He was kneeling on the ground, back between her legs. “I need a break.” He replied. Her eyes went to his thick cock, it was angry and swollen. She swallowed. “Maybe I need a break too.”

He rolled his eyes. “You don’t get a break. You get my mouth on your cunt and you get to come on my tongue again.” And he proceeded with his agenda. He wasn’t slow this time. He was rough. Maybe how he fucked her depended on his emotions. And he had layer after layer of them. She wasn’t sure what emotion this was, perhaps a mixture of him missing her and his annoyance with her. That’s how it felt, like a tug-of-war between how much he cared for her and how much he hated her for hiding from him. She liked it. Or maybe she loved it. To feel how torn apart he was, towing the line between love and hatred. Her stomach fluttered at the thought and then she let out a gasping cry as his fingers slid inside her. She was sore and swollen from being fucked so hard and still so sensitive from her previous six orgasms. At least it would be over soon. Only four more to go, she could do that. Right?

This one fluttered through her, it was smaller but no less powerful. She clenched her teeth as she came, her hand threading through his hair and yanking hard, it only edged him on, making him groan and grunt as he licked her. She shivered afterwards or maybe she was shaking. She was tired, and her shoulders sagged as she sat on the edge of the bed. Maybe she couldn’t survive this after all.

Draco, still on his knees between her legs, handed her more water. She took it and drained the glass. His expression was softer, maybe he wasn’t so angry anymore. Or maybe he never was that upset. Who was she kidding, he was very upset. It was Draco Malfoy. But maybe it was a different type of upset than she initially understood. They held each other’s stare. So much staring and so little talking and yet, she felt like she understood him better, or maybe she just understood herself better, but she too tired and too sore to talk about it. And already overwhelmed at the idea of going through another four rounds of this.

Draco refilled the water and handed her the cup, she drank more and handed it back. The silence stretched taut. Draco got onto the bed, pulling her up to his chest. They leaned against the headboard and she leaned into his chest. She was grateful to finally be touching his body more and his sturdiness gave her comfort in a way she’d missed more than she realized. His arms wrapped around her, one across her chest, the other around her hips, he pulled her close and tight and the closeness made her exhale in relief. He held her for several minutes before he started speaking.

“It was our third year of potions class when I realized how beautiful you are.” Hermione’s eyes widened and she stilled. Her heart beat quickened and she let the words sink in. She had only one hundred questions, but she refrained, instead waiting for him to continue.

“I’d been staring at you, apparently, when Crabbe elbowed me and asked me why was I looking at you for so long. I hadn’t realized I was.” He spoke quietly, carefully. She realized

in that moment that he likely had never shared this information with anyone. She placed her hands against his forearm and watched the candlelight dance along the walls. "I don't remember what I said, something about the trial for Buckbeak or how annoying you three were together, but Crabbe responded by saying, 'Yeah, too bad she's a muggle born, she's sort of pretty.'" He swallowed and paused a long moment before continuing. Hermione didn't dare say a word or move or hardly breathe. She wanted to hear every word he said, soak up every bit of information she could gather from him. "I spent the rest of class lost in those words. Sort of pretty he said." Draco huffed. "He was wrong. You weren't sort of pretty, you were the definition of pretty. More than pretty, you were smart, and brave and independent. All parts of my own personality that were barely beginning to grow. And I realized you weren't just pretty, you were beautiful. So beautiful it was equally hard to look at you and hard to stop looking at you. And I hated you for it." Hermione closed her eyes, tightening her hands on his arm and he responded by tightening his around her waist. "I hated you then because that's what I was taught to do. I was taught to be the best, to fight to be the best, to protect my interests at all costs. I was also struggling at home with the rumors I heard about Voldemort. My father had begun meeting regularly with people I knew were not only dangerous, but people who scared me. Thirteen was an age where I knew my parents were flawed, but I was still so young that I didn't think their flaws were that big of deal. At the end of the day they knew what they were doing. I trusted them and I hated you. I hated that you had so many qualities I wanted and didn't know how to cultivate. I was smart, but you were smarter. I was around dangerous people, but never felt brave. I was independent at school, but tethered to my father's expectations and last name in a way I didn't know how to break free from. I don't think I wanted independence really. I wanted the other things you had. Friends that were friends with me because they liked me and not just me last name. I was so jealous of you already and then I was angry at Crabbe for making me realize I also thought you were pretty. I hated myself for it. It felt like a betrayal to my father and to myself and to the wizarding world at large. It didn't stop me from thinking about you, or watching you, but it fueled my own self hatred and I always knew how to take it out on other people." His voice trailed off and Hermione's chest squeezed. So many complicated emotions were passing through her. The moment was a tender one and she was grateful. Grateful he was offering this story, knowing that she needed something just for her to hear. Grateful he was honest about hating her. Grateful she was in his arms naked while he told her. His hand moved over her breast and she let her hands fall from his arm.

"Thirteen is such a weird age," he whispered. His tone changed as his thumb brushed her nipple sending a shiver down her spine. "Only a few weeks later you punched me in my face." He chuckled softly. "I was so fucking pissed. My ego was bruised and I was so embarrassed, but I was mostly angry because it was so fucking hot." His other hand slid down her pelvis and into her pussy. "That's the first night I touched myself, picturing someone. Picturing you." He breathed into her ear. "I hated myself for it. Normally I only had to get off by stroking myself a few times, but it wasn't working that night. I was pissy because my nose was still sore and angry at you for embarrassing me. And then thinking of you got me so hard that I stopped. I took a cold shower. I refused. My mind however had other plans and I dreamed about you. Dreamed about you punching me. Kissing me. Touching me." His fingers circled her clit and slid across her slit. She was already wet, her breath hitched as he stroked her. "I woke up touching myself and I came so fast and so hard I thought you cursed me." Hermione smiled at this and leaned into him further. He waited a few minutes, lazily stroking her.

"At the yule ball." He whispered, a bit shakily, "That was the first time I realized I wanted to fuck you." There was sadness in his tone. "That was the worst night because I was jealous for a different reason." His fingers dipped inside her and his hand gripped her breast hard.

"Because while I had imagined you so many nights, it wasn't like I planned to pursue you and I certainly wasn't jealous of Potter or Weasley." He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "I had convinced myself it was my choice not to pursue you. My choice because I hated you and even though I was attracted to you, it didn't mean anything. You didn't mean anything to me." He practically hissed and her back arched, her eyes rolling back into her head. "That night though, seeing you on Krum's arm made me realize, pursuing you wasn't a choice I ever had in the first place." He sounded bitter now and his hand sped up, touching her more angrily too. "All at once, seeing you with someone else made me realize how much space you took up in my head, how much time I spent watching you. How much you meant to me. It felt like losing something I never had. And that night I realized I would never have you. I'd never touch you or feel your skin. I didn't deserve you and it's not like you'd come willingly." He chuckled darkly. "You can imagine where my thoughts went after that night. I could still watch you though. No one could take that away from me." His two fingers swirled around her clit and back inside her, she moaned. His hand around her breast moved up to her neck, squeezing slightly. He emphasized every word as he spoke. "You are still the definition of pretty, of beautiful, of everything good. Of everything I'm not. Touching you is literally a dream come true and I still hate how much you mean to me because even when I control *everything*, you're still in control of me. It still hurts to look at you Hermione, but I won't stop. I *can't* stop. Because it hurts worse not to look at you. I need you." His voice was ragged and strained and full of vulnerability Hermione had never heard before, she was coming and bright bursts of lights filled her vision as he spoke the words. "I hate feeling this way." He said, "but I also love feeling this way because I love you."

"Draco—" she gasped, her eyes shooting open, but his hand clamped over her mouth, cutting off whatever she was going to say. Her pussy was still pulsing around his fingers.

"Shut up." He hissed. "You want the truth, this isn't even scratching the surface, I don't want you to say it back. I don't need you to say it back. You should know that I've loved you for much longer than is appropriate or healthy or normal. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I've smothered you. I'm sorry I'm an asshole. I'm sorry that I'm not that sorry for any of it either. I'll give you space and time, but you're not the only one afraid Hermione. If you never want to see me again, that's fine, but I need to see you. I have to. I need it. I need you." He was breathing hard and he kept his hand over her mouth, probably afraid of what she'd say if he took it away. They stayed that way for a while. How long she had no clue. It had probably been more than four hours at this point. It had to be. Hermione had her eyes closed and she knew that how she handled him after this was a crossroads of sorts. He gave her more than she deserved and she didn't want to hurt him. Maybe they could just speak without words again, maybe she could tell him how much she needed him and cared for him, without saying it. Because saying it now wouldn't mean anything to him, but also she was still too afraid and it would be insincere on her part too. And he would know that and hate her for it.

When his hand finally fell away from her mouth, his other hand pulled out of her and for a moment she felt that urge to flee. That urge to run away and resist the feeling of raw vulnerability and this kind of intimacy scared her in a way that she couldn't put into words. But she stayed still, and felt his heart beat against her back and let it anchor her. His breathing

helped her steady her own breath until she was ready to face him. When she turned around, slowly and shakily, she straddled him. He didn't meet her eyes, she didn't expect him to.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck, and her legs around his waist, ignoring his erection, she felt like a koala stuck to a tree branch. She rested her head in the crook of his neck and squeezed him. After a few breaths his arms slowly came around her torso, almost like he was shocked she actually stayed and after a few more breaths she trusted herself to speak. "I'm not sorry that I hid, but I am sorry that it hurt you. Well. I'm mostly sorry, part of me is delighted I bested you for so long." Honesty. That's what she was giving him. He huffed a breath and it was enough of a laugh that she relaxed her hold onto him, daring to take a look at his eyes. He looked at her this time and she was grateful, she needed it but, it was the only time in her life she might describe him as timid looking. She didn't hesitate as she kissed him and he kissed her back, taking the reigns of control immediately. He pulled her tighter to his chest, sliding his very erect cock against her slick heat, he tugged at her lip and kissed her chin and cheeks and back to her mouth. Apparently he needed to kiss her entire face because he continued over her eyes and forehead onto the bridge of her nose. This time she wanted him more than at anypoint in the entire evening. She knew she'd be so sore tomorrow morning, so fully spent, but she wanted it, because she wanted him. Desperately and fully.

I'm yours. I'm yours. I'm yours. Every beat of her heart and slow swipe of her tongue said it to him. She couldn't say it outloud yet. It was too much. Too soon. But she'd admit it to herself for now. That was a good step. And she was proud of that. She kept telling him, silently, how much she was his. She knew he wanted to hear those words more than anything else. She was finally understanding him. Finally feeling more secure in herself more than anything. She didn't want to run away from him, maybe for fun, but not for real.

He slid inside her and she pulled away from his mouth, leaning her forehead against his and she began to ride him, she couldn't go too fast but his finger found her clit quickly. "Every time I use the loo at Malfoy Manor I sneak into your bedroom. I steal something or I hex something. Sometimes both." There. That was her confession. She was unprepared for the smile that spread on his face. It was one of his rare relaxed smiles, full, wide, and genuine. It soothed the panic in her chest instantly.

"My perfect girl." He whispered against her mouth. She came easily another two times like that. Then he rolled on top of her and they were making love, there was no doubt in her mind. Their bodies intertwined in every way. Kissing and touching and grabbing each other like if they let go for even a second they'd both drown. They anchored each other as their bodies said words neither could say. She came another two times like she was putty in his hands. His to mold and force pleasure into. He still hadn't come and she whimpered as she felt another orgasm building inside her.

"I can't," she whined. She was tired, both physically and emotionally.

"Yes, you can." He said. This wasn't his tone from the beginning where he was slightly angry with her. He was full of that extra sweet softness, the reverence and tenderness that had her swooning. She was glad it was this version of him. Whether he knew she needed this version

or he was willing to let her have this version because she finally deserved it again she didn't know and she didn't care.

"Draco." She exhaled.

"Shhhh." he hummed. "I'm going to come with you baby. I'm right here with you. I feel you." She didn't know quite what he meant by that. Or what it could mean. But it had the right effect and she relaxed. He noticed instantly. "That's it, you're doing so good. You've done such a good job all night. You're perfect. So perfect. So pretty."

And finally on her twelfth orgasm they came together. Draco was loud. Moaning and whimpering through it, it turned her on so much her own pleasure felt endless. It was heaven. It was indescribable. She had no words to say how she felt other than to accept that she so completely in love with him that she wanted to cry and scream. So she did both. A few tears ran down her cheeks at the self confession and she screamed his name as he moaned loudly over her mouth and it was perfect. He was perfect and she loved him and she didn't know what that meant. Tomorrow she'd be able to figure it out, but for now she held onto him, anchoring into him. Keeping herself from drowning in her own emotions.

They laid together for several minutes before an alarm went off somewhere.

"There is no way that was under four hours." She breathed.

"There most definitely is a way because I timed it." Draco replied simply.

He lifted off the bed and then picked her up carrying her to the bathroom. A hot steaming shower awaited them and he washed her body, holding most of her weight against his chest. After he washed her hair he spent another fifteen minutes kissing her, before wrapping her in a robe and carrying her back to bed. He fed her crackers and cheese, water, and a preemptive pain potion. He wished his wand and the candles disappeared, making the room dark and her exhaustion hit her instantly. He spooned her in bed. They were quiet, they'd hardly spoke since the alarm went off. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, more like a mutual understanding. Like both understood how special and precarious the night had felt. Both of them were exhausted by it.

"Thank you." She whispered as her eyes slipped closed.

"For what?" He asked as he stroked her hair.

"Everything." She replied, and fell asleep in a mixture of bliss so complete she was sure it wasn't just her own emotions. It was magic. Pure magic swirling through her. Or something that felt like magic. Something that was strange and beautiful and perfect. Just like Draco.

Hermione knew Draco wouldn't be there when she woke up. She'd asked for space and he was giving her the space, but it was still disappointing nonetheless when she woke up the next day alone.

There was a bouquet of red roses, her wand, and a note on her nightstand when she woke up.

Thank you for everything too.

Love,

DM

How could two words hold so much weight? *Love, DM*. It wasn't even two words. It was one word and two letters and yet her heart beat so fast she had to believe the words held their own magic too. They did in a way. His confession had woven into her dreams. Memories of catching him staring at her at Hogwarts, the day she punched him but it morphed and she kissed him afterwards. She dreamt of dancing with him at the Yule ball while Ron puked and Harry gave her the silent treatment.

Seeing those words again on his note felt real in a way last night's truths didn't. Because there was something about seeing them written, seeing his handwriting write the word love instead of hate that helped her feel...safe. She clutched the note to her chest, closing her eyes while laying in bed that morning. She wasn't sure what she was doing. Mediating on his words and her feelings, perhaps. She just needed time to hold the words close. They needed to have a proper conversation. She needed to tell him what kind of space she needed and wanted. He needed to share his own expectations and she really fucking wanted that bed back. Also she wanted to know what to call him. They didn't even have a label. Was he her boyfriend? He felt like more than that, but there wasn't anything more than a boyfriend that wasn't a husband and she wasn't ready to marry him. Was she? No. She wasn't, but maybe in the future. Maybe if that's what he wanted. They really needed to talk, but she knew today he was busy and so was she, because when she received her mail this morning her approval for a family visit to Azkaban had been approved for two days away. She also didn't want to rush anything. There was no rush for them. She was finally feeling grounded and less turbulent, still fucking terrified, but also thrilled because she was in love. The things he shared replayed in her mind as she showered, as she got dressed.

Her cupboards had been restocked with food. Her fridge was full of fresh produce, yogurt, and eggs. He left her a *single* bottle of wine and she couldn't decide if it was a kind gesture or a petty one.

Hermione was absolutely certain that the cameras she'd uninstalled were back on, probably permanently on, and most likely there were more than she knew about. Double or triple the amount. She wondered if he'd ever tell her where they all were. Probably not. But just because she wanted to show him how much she understood him, she took a walk outside. She was still somewhat sore, but the tenderness was a sign that everything that had happened was real and she relished in that. She walked down the block just to the end of the street, where there was nothing for her to do or see, just a street cross. Then she walked back to her own apartment. Showing him she came out just for him. Showing him without telling him she loved him and she was grateful for his patience.

And then she got to work preparing for her visit to Azkaban.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your comments. They bring me so much joy. I'm so glad you all enjoy this story as much as I do. The last chapter was so fun to write and your reactions had me smiling like crazy. Writing this has been so fun and I've learned so much about myself as a writer. It's so encouraging to hear your feedback.

Let the adventure continue....

Hermione was certain, even with all the progress that her and Draco made two days ago, that he would not approve of her going to Azkaban.

It wasn't a naive decision not to tell him. Draco's love was obsessive and irrational. She could accept that. Mostly. It was still hard to wrap her mind around. Especially after reading the courtship books she'd bought, but hadn't bothered reading. The last two days had been enlightening to say the least. It was part of the reason she hadn't bothered reaching out to him. She didn't want to overreact, because if she had seen him after all her reading, that's what she would have done.

Hermione was kicking herself for not doing research sooner on the topic, the little she read before was on etiquette around pureblood women's roles in wizarding society and being a devoted wife. The books she read over the last forty-eight hours were from men's perspectives and oh boy were they different. Part of her was also grateful, because she would have freaked out if she read them any sooner. She would have lost her shit. Draco announcing a courtship in front of so many wizards who understood the implications now was not as romantic as she once considered it. Draco had lied about courtship. Or at best grossly misrepresented it. Narcissa did too.

Fucking Slytherins.

Ron was right. Courtship meant ownership. Quite literally.

If a male, especially a powerful one pursued you, you were a public weakness, and that was not acceptable. Weakness meant vulnerability, and no self-respecting wizard would allow himself to be vulnerable, not without being able to control that vulnerability. So a female gave herself over to be taken care of, but ultimately to be controlled. The male gave whatever the woman desired. Money, power, security. Love wasn't necessary, but sex was always negotiated into those contracts. Purebloods used contracts to clarify the expectations for both the marriage and business arrangements, but the sentiment was the same no matter which book she read. If you signed the contract, you were practically property and there was no going back. Most courtships required a blood oath or an unbreakable vow, sometimes

both, on top of the wedding bond. It was a heavy weight in Hermione's chest as she walked through Malfoy manor.

She was still mulling over the information deciding how to proceed with her new found understanding of his possessive jealousy at the Halloween party. He practically told the crowd, "*I own Hermione Granger, or plan to own her shortly. So stay the fuck away from her.*" And Hermione, like a love sick, overly sentimental ignorant witch she was, thought it was romantic, sweet even. Courtships were respected in the wizarding world and yes more and more of them were now for love, but the cultural aspect of it? The implications of power and control were still very evident. It was clear that's exactly how Draco was using it then. He had been so apologetic because he assumed she understood what it meant and he got lucky it was a subject she was uneducated on. So her forgiveness came quickly and much too easily. Gods. This feeling was awful. She wanted to know everything. She wanted to learn every bit of information about everything on the fucking planet so that no one could trick her or manipulate her, because that's what he'd done. He'd used her ignorance against her and probably didn't even feel guilty about it.

Godsdamn him.

The other part of her, the part of her that stopped her from screaming at him and confronting him and forcing him on his knees to beg for her forgiveness was the part of her that knew his feelings were genuine. He was not faking his affection. He cared for her. He loved her. And that made it confusing. Hermione wanted his love, but it was such a big love. Narcissa had tried to warn her, sort of. Hermione didn't really get it though. She didn't understand how heavy the love would be. He loved her and it was obsessive. The kind that made him justify twisting the truth to benefit him. He'd told her that too. He wasn't a good person. He was selfish.

So no. She wasn't going to tell him where she was going, because she knew that he wouldn't even try to argue with her at this point. He'd grab her, throw her over his shoulder and probably disappear with her. And it was better to ask forgiveness than permission, because more than simply going to Azkaban, Hermione also knew that Draco wouldn't approve of her trip simply because of *who* she was seeing there. Lucius and Draco were not on good terms. He hardly ever talked about his father, but Narcissa had shared, and Lucius had shared in his own way too. Hermione knew that Draco wouldn't approve of their meeting and that was another good reason she wouldn't share just yet.

Hermione wasn't reckless though like Draco thought she was. This morning instead of going directly to the boat docks, she'd floo'd to Malfoy manor.

Blaise was in the study she preferred when she approached the door. He was on babysitting duty today and she sighed before speaking, preparing for a fight. "This is me, telling you the truth." She started. His eyes narrowed as he leaned back into his chair, propping his legs on the desk. He was feigning nonchalance and Hermione could see right through it.

"I won't tell you where I'm going or why," Hermione said, when he remained silent. "I will eventually though."

"That is technically honest, but extremely vague, you realize." His jaw tightened. She knew he was debating on how to proceed, what to tell Draco, and if he should stop her.

"I do." Hermione replied. "I do realize that and I know that it's probably annoying, but I'm going to go regardless. I have a portkey in my purse and if you try to touch me I'll just leave and you'll have no more information."

Blaise sat up straighter realizing she'd come prepared for his protests. "Alright, then why tell me at all?"

"Because I want you to call a meeting this afternoon with everyone." Hermione swallowed. "I need help." It wasn't that it was hard to ask for help, but the words felt strange. Okay maybe it was hard to ask for help. She shifted on her feet.

"Alright." Blaise nodded, understanding moving through his features. "What time?"

"If everything is on schedule, around three this afternoon." Hermione glanced at the grandfather clock in the room. "Gather the troops and I'll explain what I've been up to and you can explain what you do with those message boards." She offered a smile. "And I'd appreciate your discretion."

He rolled his eyes. "You've told me exactly nothing to pass on."

"Well, it's time for me to go." She grabbed the coin that was her portkey. "If you absolutely need to know, Narcissa knows where I'll be."

She landed on the docks that transported her to Azkaban and waited for the boat. Hermione was wearing Draco's white button up shirt and it felt like armor. In a way it was armor with how it deflected so many spells.

They hadn't spoken since the morning she took that walk. He texted her after she went back into her apartment, "*You're so beautiful. Being freshly fucked looks good on you.*" She replied, "*I agree.*"

He hadn't replied and she hadn't reached out. She knew the ball was in her court and that's what prompted her to start researching seriously about the things he wanted and there was a reason he didn't call her his date or say they were dating. He told everyone they were courting, because he was a pureblood wizard staking his claim. Draco was waiting for Hermione to make the next move or make a request or take revenge. Hermione was certain he knew she was more educated about courtships, but she'd speak about it with him tonight. At least bring it up a little bit. She hoped that this meeting with the group would offer him more of her too, despite her conflicted feelings about their courtship. Sharing her information on Azkaban would put them all in danger but sharing the burden of it would also be a relief. It was a sign of trust and a truce of sorts. A willingness to collaborate and compromise. It was her inviting him in to work with her and not just as her shield.

“Morning.” McLaggen said as he approached her just as the boat came into view. The cold wind blew against her hair, whipping it in her face and she clutched her beaded bag around her tighter.

“Are you ready?” Hermione responded. She didn’t care to make small talk, her nerves were too wild.

“As I’ll ever be.” He sighed. “And you’re sure about this?”

“Absolutely.” Hermione lifted her chin.

The boat ride was awful and her stomach hated the choppy waves, but the feeling of being on Azkaban property felt ten times as worse. The dementors had been gone for years and yet she could feel them like smoke clinging to the walls. As if they had forever imprinted their darkness and coldness into every stone in the ground and wall of the building.

“Malfoy, Lucius.” Hermione stated to the guard checking her in.

He sneered at her as he checked the log. “Wand please.” She handed it over. The guard glanced at McLaggen. “And yours too.”

“Oh we’re not here together. I’m here as an official Auror, just taking some files upstairs.” He responded, lifting his badge and a stack of papers in his other hand.

The guard nodded, then wrinkled his brow, directing his attention to Hermione. “This is a family visit. You’re not related to Malfoy.”

“I’m courting his son.” She responded. “And Mrs. Malfoy requested my presence. She’d like me to meet the Master of the Malfoy manor.”

The guard rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

“I’ll take his mail too.” Hermione gave him a flat smile when he didn’t move. “Family members are allowed to request mail according to your policy-”

“Yeah, I know the policy.” He huffed, gritting his teeth. He finally moved as he glanced to McLaggen and handed a large stack of mail to Hermione.

“Have you been withholding mail from Mr. Malfoy?” Hermione asked boldly, like she did every time she’d visited.

“Nope. It’s all dated today.” The guard smirked. “Busy mail day.”

Hermione glared at the guard before turning and walking through the doorway. McLaggen followed a few paces behind as they walked past the cells. Curious prisoner’s peered through the small windows, some calling out with whistles or laughing sinisterly. Then casually Cormac turned down the opposite hallway as her.

Hermione started a mental timer. This would work. This had to work.

When she reached Lucius' door she took a deep breath, she wasn't in the mood for one of his bad moods.

She knocked and then opened the door not waiting for his permission. Time was of the essence. The room was a drab rectangular space. A single bed and semi private bathroom in opposite corners at the end of the room. Lucius was sitting on the bed, a leg chained to a bolt into the center of the room. Just enough to be able to walk around the room, not enough to reach the door. When he glanced up at her, she gasped.

"Oh look, my favorite fluffernutter." He hissed. She moved to him quickly. His entire face was filled with purple bruises. His left eye was swollen and completely shut. His lip was split and an angry reddish wound encircled his throat as if he'd been strangled.

She reached into her bag, taking out the salve she'd packed. Most magic didn't work here, but the slave was one of the few approved, *personal* items she knew she could bring. The ignorance of wizards stopped them from checking her bag for muggle items, simply waving a wand over it to check for magical items.

"Do you want to do it? Or shall I?" She sighed.

He just stared at her like she was an idiot and it was so much like Draco that she laughed. Then her smile slipped away when she saw how crippled his fingers were, they were all broken. All of them, twisted at sharp, painful angles. Her stomach churned as bile went up her throat.

"What the fuck," she hissed and marched back to the door. It took her twenty minutes of arguing with the guard, threatening to press charges before they finally got a healer to mend his hands. His hands were the only injury the guard deemed worthy of healing and she got his name and badge number afterwards. Levi, 229975 would be reported for negligence and she wouldn't hesitate to write about him in her book.

"What are you going to do? Report me to your boyfriend?" He taunted.

"No." Hermione smiled and she saw the guard's expression falter slightly. "You should be afraid of me though."

"I ain't afraid of some mudblood bitch." He laughed as he walked away slamming the door.

Hermione exhaled as she paced the width of the room. Lucius applied the salve to his face and stood, leaving the container on the bed. He didn't bother saying thank you, but that was normal because he never did. This routine of healing his injuries was growing old though.

"How come he can say fluffernutter, but I can't?" He taunted, his arms behind his back.

Hermione had banned the word mudblood from Lucius' vocabulary by using a magically cursed cupcake on his birthday the second time she visited him. That was years ago and she suspected he only said the word now because he found the word entertaining. That and it

irritated her. When he agreed to be interviewed for her book, she was surprised, but it was evident upon their first meeting he had his own agenda, Malfoys always did. He also liked pushing her buttons.

“What happened?” She asked, stopping with her hands on her hips.

“You’re courting my son.” He said flatly.

“And they beat you up because of it?” Hermione furrowed her brow.

“They wanted more information than I had.” He shrugged. She handed over the mail, noticing how many letters came from Bennett Salvatore. That was something that still made her stomach flutter. Gods, Draco was so annoying and clever.

“I haven’t had any mail in three months and then you show up and suddenly have three months worth of mail, the power of a fluffernutter is incredible.” He said taking the letters and then throwing them on his bed without looking at them.

She sighed, “What are we doing today? How are your classes going?”

He smiled slightly, as much as he could with a split lip and swollen cheek. “I recently read a book about a very lazy, gluttonous caterpillar. So first we’ll make a craft to celebrate his sins and then play catch.”

“Alright.” Hermione nodded. “Did your last project go well? The one for Valentine’s day?”

“Yes, high marks and praise.” Lucius’s condescension didn’t go unnoticed by her, but she ignored it anyway. The sooner they finished his craft, the faster she could start her part of the bargain. Thirty minutes later after Lucius taught her, in his most mocking, arrogant way to date, they had created little green and red caterpillars. He placed them in a box underneath his bed. His access to muggle computers were hit and miss but generally he was allowed daily or weekly access. It allowed him to pursue his online degree in a self paced muggle program. One class at a time, Lucius was becoming a primary teacher. It was a crucial part of his plan to be released from Azkaban, if it was ever approved. He grabbed the round blue rubber ball he stored in the same box and tossed it to her. Hard. Okay, so it was that kind of mood. Great.

She threw the ball back at him. “Tell me about The Brotherhood.”

Lucius wrinkled his nose. “Why?” He caught the ball, and tossed it back.

“I’m pretty sure they’re laundering money through the prison, beating the prisoner’s up for secrets to blackmail politicians with, Ron Weasley is making a bid for minister of magic and I’m pretty sure he’s using his ties to The Brotherhood to orchestrate his influence with voters, or maybe someone else is using him as a puppet to do their bidding, that part is a little murky. Oh and the campaign is all focused on me. On fluffernutters.” Hermione sighed, throwing the ball back.

"Is that all?" Lucius eyebrows rose, catching the ball and rolling it in his healed hands.
"Hmmm. That makes more sense."

Hermione looked at him expectantly. Lucius had made his terms clear when she first started coming here. If Hermione helped him with a release plan, he'd answer her questions about her book. And he'd kept his end of the bargain. He was direct with his responses. Rude, arrogant, and sometimes even cruel, but direct. Hermione appreciated the efficiency.

"The brotherhood is a group that a few wizards created for business relationships with those who were not as well connected or wealthy as some of us more important wizards." He flicked an eyebrow up. "I didn't know they were still around. The last time I heard of them was when Draco was young, maybe five or six."

Hermione considered this. "And now that they're back what does this mean?"

Lucius shrugged. "The guards do ask about you a lot." He said quietly. "At first it was about Potter or my son, but then it was suddenly about you. Why you came, what we talked about. They've offered me a lot of perks for exchanging information on you." He tossed the ball back a little harder this time.

"And what did you say?" She had to jump to catch it. Was he trying to hit her in the head? She tossed the ball back, putting some sharpness in her throw as well.

"I got punched in the face. Repeatedly." He said flatly, catching it easily. "So what evidence have you found?" He waved the ball around.

Hermione shifted on her feet, staring down at the worn concrete floor "Nothing strong yet."
Lucius laughed, cackling loudly.

She jerked her head up. "I'm trying," she snapped.

"And yet still failing." He pouted his bottom lip, his condescension was thick and it had her spine straightening.

"Why do you think I'm here today? Just to visit you?" Hermione lifted her chin. "This place is the center of a lot of the illegal activity."

"Of course you're here for me. You want to know about Draco." He smiled, knowingly.

"If I asked about him would you tell me?" Hermione arched her brow.

Lucius shrugged. "Perhaps, depending on the question." That was true. Hermione could ask just about anything and Lucius answered almost all of her questions, but she had never dared ask about Draco. Because if there was one thing she learned from all her conversations with Lucius, is the questions she asked told him more about herself than anything else. He never skipped over the opportunity to use that against her.

"What does he write to you about?" She asked, testing the waters.

"How much he hates me." Lucius said, bristling. "The boy has always been so sensitive." He wrinkled his nose.

"I think he gets that from you. It's certainly not a trait I see in Narcissa." Hermione rolled her eyes.

Lucius' jaw tightened. "How is my wife?" He glanced at the letters. "The last time she was here, we argued." His tone was tight and she could tell how much fighting with Narcissa bothered him. Narcissa was an easy bruise for her to poke at. He always showed his cards when it came to her.

"She's fine." Hermione replied slowly, watching his reaction. "What did you fight about?"

"You." He smiled, but it wasn't kind. She realized that's why his mood was so sour. He was upset with her and she could guess why. Part of the reason she hadn't visited him in a while. Since May. Hermione was afraid Lucius would take one look at her and smell the fact that she slept with Draco.

"Because I'm dating your son?" Hermione had wondered what his reaction would be, certainly not favorable. Her and Lucius weren't exactly friends or enemies, but something of a blend of the two. He didn't like her, she knew that. She didn't like him either. More like she pitied him. He knew that and Hermione knew and it bothered him to be pitied by someone like her. Lucius was rude and arrogant and honestly a lot like Draco. *Damn.* How could she just now see all their similarities? Is this what love was like? Ignoring all the glaring red flags because of the butterflies?

"Yes, you'll ruin our bloodline." He stated, gripping the ball tighter.

"I would." Hermione replied. She understood arguing with him about blood purity went absolutely nowhere. They'd had vigorous debates about it. Lucius would never concede he was wrong. It didn't make it hurt less, but ignoring the bait helped her avoid the arguments he wanted to pull her into. Plus she liked to push his buttons back. "But I'd make your grandchildren so much smarter."

His nose twitched, "So you're already talking about kids and marriage? What are the terms of your contract?"

Hermione smiled, more so to herself, because their only terms were around the bed he had already taken away. "That's none of your business."

"You don't have a contract." He rolled his eyes.

"We do." Hermione replied, "The terms aren't up for discussion though. Narcissa is helping me. She told me about the next steps." Hermione paced. "I think we'll visit your vaults soon."

Lucius chucked the ball at her and Hermione had to duck to miss it from hitting her. She gasped. "What the fuck." He was trying to hit her with it. Bastard.

“Oops.” He stood there staring at her as the ball rolled to her feet, she stopped it, placing a foot on top of it.

Hermione cocked her head. “Why does it bother you so much?” She genuinely wanted to know. She didn’t care about his opinion, but she was curious about his perspective.

“I already told you. You’d ruin our blood line.”

Hermione teased him further, “What if Draco and I were already married?”

“I’d know.”

“Would you?” Hermione taunted. “Does he talk about his personal life in between how much he hates you?”

“I’d feel the magical change. He’s the heir to manor and when he marries the transfer of power will move to him.” He shared, which surprised Hermione.

“You don’t have to die for that?” Hermione frowned.

“Is that why you’re here? To kill me?” He lifted a brow.

“Yes, I healed your hands and your face, just to kill you.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Just tell me one legitimate reason why I shouldn’t marry your son.” Marriage wasn’t even on her radar, truly, it wasn’t. She was young and not in a rush, but Lucius’ insistence that she shouldn’t marry Draco pissed her off. It made her want to be contrary and primed to argue.

“I’ll give you a million galleons to leave him.” Lucius replied. It was so unexpected that Hermione stilled and then she laughed, picking up the ball at her feet.

“You cannot be serious.”

But he was. His expression was severe and pleading. This is what he and his wife argued over? Getting rid of her? Hermione’s smug smile was involuntary. She was grateful how close she and Narcissa were. Grateful that Narcissa was the only one Lucius Malfoy would bow down to.

“Fine. Two million.” He replied, irritation burning through his words.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “That’s insulting. That’s chump change to you. Draco would give me double if I asked.” Hermione began pacing, tossing the ball in her own hand. Lucius watched her, his jaw working. She didn’t want Draco’s money, but it was fun to watch him squirm.

“You’re going to get him killed.” Lucius’ voice cut through her like a knife, but it was his tone that made her steps falter. She turned to him. Lucius wasn’t a kind man and that made her forget that he could love other people, besides himself. And the more she understood Draco, the more she understood Lucius. Staring at him and his hard expression reframed so many of their past conversations instantly. His love was just as obsessive, just as possessive. And in this way, she could almost understand his choices in the war. How he weighed the

options and chose the path that felt more rigged in his favor and his family's wellbeing. She stared at the man who fought for blood supremacy and she could almost believe that it wasn't personal at all. It was just.. business. Well, *almost*. Her morality always kicked in before she could give him too much compassion.

"Your son inserts himself in my life more than you can imagine." Hermione replied. Lucius must have seen something on her face. The guilt she felt for putting Draco in harm's way as her bodyguard. For the meeting they were supposed to have later today. For the injuries he'd already sustained because of her. Lucius saw the crack and wrenched it open.

"You have the power to stop it. You can tell him you don't actually want to court him." His expression turned haughty. "You do know what courting means don't you?" He smirked. Hermione clenched her jaw. Fuck she should have just asked Lucius from the very beginning about courting and he would have been completely, brutally honest with her. "You can tell him goodbye. Move on. Move away." He waved his hand in the air. "And I'll give you ten million galleons a year for every year you stay away." Lucius spoke calmly, but she could see the desperation in his eyes. Hermione was simply a risk to his son, it wasn't because she was a godsdamned fluffernutter. It was because it was Draco. Lucius didn't like the risks to his son's life when he looked at her.

"Why are you so sure I'm going to get him hurt? He's a powerful wizard who can protect himself." Hermione jutted her chin. "Why am I responsible for his safety?"

"Because if you stay with him," he gritted out, clearly annoyed with her ignorance, "if you marry him, if you sign that contract, he will die for you. If there is ever the choice between your life and his, it will be easy for him to choose. I'd like to stop him from making that choice."

Hermione's throat tightened painfully and her eyes stung. She wouldn't allow herself to cry in front of him. So she inhaled sharply, painfully aware that Lucius was wrong. Draco wouldn't wait to sign a contract, he'd die for her now. Today if necessary. Too many pieces were falling into place and the picture that was being created was so very heavy.

Draco's love was all encompassing and all or nothing.

"And if someone had tried to convince Narcissa of what you're trying to convince me?" Hermione's voice, thankfully, was steady and strong, but she didn't feel that way. She felt completely knocked off kilter. Her knees felt weak and her shoulders wanted to sag, but she forced herself to stay still. To not back down or show weakness in front of him.

Lucius lifted his chin, but before he could speak the cutting remarks on his tongue, the door swung open.

"Time's up Granger." Anthony Goldstein's voice reminded her of the other reason why she came.

"Hi Anthony." Hermione ignored his command, assessing his demeanor. "I didn't know you'd be working today." She lied, smiling demurely.

"She actually has half an hour left." Lucius' tone had shifted completely. Like a light switch turned on in the room, he changed his energy completely. Hermione glanced at Lucius. He was on edge, face completely blank, save for the sneer on his lips.

Goldstein smirked, "Well, today we shortened the visit. I'm here to walk her out."

"Where did Levi go?" Lucius moved towards Hermione and she didn't know what power struggle the two men were having, but it put Hermione on edge too. The chain attached to Lucius' leg prevented him from moving too close to touch her and she was so focused on trying to read the man she didn't realize how close Anthony had gotten to her. His voice startled her.

"Granger." He said, frustration in his tone. "Let's go."

She wasn't ready to go because she had to wait for McLaggen. She was the distraction, he was the spy. If she left the building, he'd get caught.

"Can I have fifteen more minutes?" Hermione asked, sweetly. "We were just wrapping up, but I'd love to actually chat with you afterwards." She tried to sound casual, but was sure it didn't come off as smoothly as she wanted it to.

Goldstein considered her compromise and smiled, "Yeah that's fine. Meet me in my office. I'd like to talk with you too." His smile made her stomach turn. He left and Hermione didn't turn around immediately, still watching the door, waiting for him to change his mind.

"Don't go into his office." Lucius said.

Hermione became annoyed at his hot and cold attitude towards her. He was closer now, Hermione didn't move away. "If I leave Draco, it would hurt him. Very badly." Her voice broke and she cursed herself for it.

"I know." Lucius' own voice was tight, "but I'd rather him have a broken heart than be dead," he said flatly.

"I don't want his money or your money." She replied, crossing her arms.

"I wish you did." Lucius held her stare.

"Could you live without Narcissa? Could you live with that kind of heartbreak?" Hermione asked, sincerely. Could Draco live without her? Would it be worth his safety?

Lucius hissed, "Stop comparing yourself to my wife. Do you even love him? Or are you just fascinated by his attention?"

Hermione had asked herself this question too. Especially over the last two days. Out of all the people she imagined talking about her feelings for Draco to, Lucius Malfoy was not in the top hundred, let alone the first one. Narcissa cared for Draco's emotional wellbeing, yes, but Lucius was the only one concerned with Draco's physical safety and Hermione liked that they had that in common.

"I do love him." She replied simply. The words coming out of her mouth sent a jolt down her spine, like she might sprout wings and fly out of her with the admission.. Her heart raced and she swallowed hard. Why did she want to cry?

"You hesitated." He bristled. "And your hesitation tells me-"

"Courtships are hard for me to understand and Draco wasn't exactly truthful with me when he explained it." Hermione's anger was directed both at Lucius' insinuation that her love wasn't genuine and at Draco for lying to her. Both Malfoy men were manipulative assholes.

Was that pride on his face? Lucius grinned, satisfied by his son's actions. Hermione lashed out. "You seem awfully concerned about a son that hates you."

"It's a phase. All Malfoy men hate their father's at some point." Lucius stated as if that fact wasn't concerning to him at all.

"Or maybe you could apologize to him." Hermione said angrily, shaking her head. The parent child relationship was especially sensitive for Hermione after everything she went through with her mother and his dismissiveness of Draco's feelings really disgusted her. Lucius seemed genuinely offended at her idea.

"Malfoy men don't apologize." He spat. "But we are good at entrapment and it seems my son has done a good job cornering you." Hermione knew it was a deflection, but it worked.

"I'm not trapped!" Hermione snapped.

"Then leave him," he insisted. She wanted to slap him and she balled her hands into fists at her sides.

"Don't worry," he said, glancing at her hands. "The guards will do it for you." Hermione's anger shattered like a dropped tea cup on concrete.

"They're going to hurt you for my visit?" Hermione gasped, realizing she was at the center for all this mess.

He arched a brow, annoyed at her ignorance again. "Not if I share information of course, but you already know that."

Hermione scrambled, wracking her brain for information. For any secrets she could tell him and stop him from being punished for her actions.

Lucius shook his head, "Don't be the hero, fluffernutter. It's too cliche." He drawled watching her panic rise. She opened her mouth and he held up a hand. "Let yourself be selfish."

She huffed a breath. "Tell them Cormac McLaggen knows who I was with on June fifth, in the pictures I'm being blackmailed by." She stated. "Tell anyone who asks." Nodding at her decision. "Remember who you tell though so I can track the information. I'll write to you."

"That doesn't seem very helpful." He furrowed his brow.

"I need time to set some things up so it's vague, yes, but if the information makes it to the right people, the people after me, then it will mean something to them. Don't say anything until I leave the building though." Hermione clutched her bag.

"That will still get me punched in the face." Lucius frowned.

"But not your hands broken." Hermione smiled. She needed to go and she started towards the door.

"Who were you with on June fifth?" Lucius asked her. She turned, her hand still on the door handle.

"Your son." She said, "But if they know that too soon, it might be dangerous for him."

Lucius snarled, but before he could insult her she spoke first.

"And I'll take your advice." Her face remained blank.

Lucius' face faltered, "You will?"

"Yes. I'll be selfish." She held his stare as understanding moved through his features, rearranging into a seething glare. And then she left.

She walked down the hallway and she exhaled a breath as she saw McLaggen right on time pass by her with an imperceptible nod. *He'd done it.* He'd gone through the files. She'd meet him on the docks in just a few minutes. She slowed her steps, not wanting to seem too eager but also to catch her breath from the meeting with Lucius. He was never kind when they met, but today he was especially nasty. It was worth it though. Today was worth it all if McLaggen was successful. Lucius was helpful in his own twisted way. And if he-

Hermione was grabbed by her hair from behind, hard and painful, she cried out, but a hand roughly clamped over mouth. The man behind her was large and thick. Easily overtaking her by size alone. He had his wand to her neck. "Don't move and this will be a lot easier."

She didn't recognize his voice, but his breath smelled like ash and smoked meat. It was gross and her panic told her to run away, run away. She squirmed trying to break free, elbowing his ribs and trying to stomp on his feet. He tightened his hold, easily pulling her up and against his body. Her thrashing did nothing to stop him. He dragged her into a darkened corridor away from the main hallway. If another guard walked past would they help? Would they join him? His wand pressed harder into her neck.

"If you just hold still you can leave soon." He snapped angrily. She stilled now, except her heaving chest, as she breathed sharply through her nose. "Thank you." He replied at her compliance. She hated it. She didn't want to listen to him. She wanted to get away from his sweaty body.

The wand at her throat dragged down her neck slowly, down the front of her shirt, *Draco's shirt.* The white button up that comforted her the whole boat ride here. The tip of the wand

wound around her breasts and she let out a muffled cry.

“Shhh.” He said harshly. “Mudbloods are going to be the new house elves, you know.” He whispered to her. “But we can’t have them procreating.”

The wand dipped past her waist band of her trousers, where her shirt was tucked into them. Pressing painfully into her lower abdomen, he began muttering a spell, something she’d never heard before, something that instantly felt like dark magic. Like something nasty and oily and cold and bitter. The man behind her began chanting louder, more frustrated. She was frozen, panicking at what was happening.

“What the fuck.” The man hissed. He spoke at a normal volume, but it was as if he yelled it because her body jerked at his voice. He spun her around suddenly and pushed her up against the wall. She cried as her head slammed into the concrete behind her, pain ringing in the back of her head and through her ears. The man had a guard’s uniform and the name tag blurred as her eyes tried to refocus. *Branson*. He held her against the wall, his forearm against her chest, making it hard to breathe and hard to concentrate.

She tried to move again, but he pressed down harder, making the bones of her chest bare the brunt of his weight, feeling like they might crack with just a little more pressure. It was so hard to breathe, still she tried to move, but he slapped her hard across her face this time. Her head jerked sideways and she stilled completely from his blow. He pulled her shirt up and yanked on her pants, pulling the button undone.

Hermione’s whole body flooded with icy terror.

Her bones felt hollow and as her breath was wrenched from her lungs. She couldn’t breathe. Tears fell from her cheeks. Her whole body was stiff and cold and she wanted to vomit.

Branson pressed his wand into her bare skin as he began chanting his spell. It was like being sliced with a serrated knife, jagged and harsh. Wet liquid dripped down her legs and it was the realization that it was her blood trickling down her body that sent a sharp electric like awareness through her. She needed to fight. Hermione screamed loudly, but Branson didn’t stop. Her bag was still wrapped around her chest and she reacted fast, reaching in, adrenaline allowing her to ignore the hellish pain erupting through her body, while the guard remained focused on his task. She found what she was looking for and slid it open, slamming the pocket knife Draco had given to her hard into Branson’s chest. She struck bone. It vibrated against her, but the strike stopped him.

He stumbled back, glancing at the knife already falling out of his chest, clattering to the ground.

There was a beat of silence.

It was her chance to move. She used his slow reaction time to grab his wand.

She screamed, “Alohomora!” as she ran through the corridor. The wand sparked, but nothing came.

Please Merlin, be on her side. She focused with everything inside her, gathering her magic, but it began to feel distant inside her, like water draining in a bathtub. “Alohomora! Alohomora!” The doors around them began sliding open. Prisoners began yelling, some leaving their cells.

Branson was barking something incoherent, behind her, as blood pounded in her ears. Hermione ran screaming the spell. She barreled through the halls as guards ran past her and as prisoners began pouring out rapidly from their rooms, some already fighting each other. The front desk was empty. “Accio wand.” She whimpered and her wand whizzed through the air.

The pain in her body was unbearable. Every step felt like being sliced open again, like breathing with crushed glass inside her lungs. The blood was soaking into her dark pants at an alarming rate. She hobbled through the front doors and as she was leaving she swore she could hear Lucius screaming her name.

Her vision blurred as the wind whipped through her hair. She couldn’t see McLaggen. She could hardly see anything. She needed to go home. She needed a doctor. She glanced down at her hand, clutched at her stomach, drenched in blood.

Her body began to shake, too afraid to look at the wound in her stomach. She needed to stop the bleeding but she felt her magic waning, slipping away like handfuls of sand. She had to make a choice. She had to decide how to use the magic she could grab onto. Healing herself would be useless because she didn’t know what spell Branson used. She didn’t have enough energy to perform the necessary diagnostic charms *and* heal herself anyway. Apparating was also very dangerous. Splinching was a real possibility. The blood loss alone could cause problems. But she was good at it. Good and fast and direct. She moved farther away from the building past the anti apparition wards.

It was the distance that stopped people from apperating. The distance that was the biggest risk. The other option was wait for a guard to notice her. No fucking thank you.

She gritted her teeth so hard her jaw cramped and her teeth felt like they might crack. Hermione breathed rapidly through her nose, closed her eyes and gripped as tightly as she possibly could to both wands. She drew on her magic with every shaky breath. Her pulse was slowing and her head grew foggy, but it was Draco’s face she imagined as she apparated away, praying that she’d make it back to him in one piece as she apperated away.

Chapter 28

Draco was on edge. Ever since telling Hermione that he loved her he felt like he'd been dragged across hot coals, but today felt even worse. Patience was a skill he hadn't mastered, but he was trying. He tugged on his collar as sweat trickled down his back. When Hermione walked out of her apartment two days ago Draco was grateful, but he was also aggravated. Why hadn't she called him and begged him to come back to her apartment? He was giving her space, but how much space did she fucking need? Okay, so he wasn't trying very hard to be patient. He wanted her to soothe his anxiety about where they stood. He was asking for a lot, Draco was asking for everything actually. He wanted her in every way possible. It was ridiculous based on their relationship timeline and it wasn't fair to ask for so much so quickly. He knew that, but he wasn't a fair man and never claimed to be. He also didn't know how to take things slow. He didn't know how not to love her wholly and completely. Draco's feelings for her were uncontrollable at this point. It felt bigger than his body could contain most days. It was all consuming.

Now, as he sat in the manor waiting for her to arrive for this meeting she called for, he couldn't stop fidgeting. Sweat continued gathering at the back of his neck despite the perfect temperature of the room. Loosening his tie, he reasoned he just wanted to see her. He hoped she would feel safer with him after he confessed his love, but he couldn't help but worry it simply overwhelmed her more, making her pull away from him. Did he do the right thing by telling her? It wasn't exactly in his plan that evening, but that evening was... it was a lot of things, but after not seeing her for ten days, he knew he couldn't live without her again. And to need someone so much felt sickening.

He sighed, rubbing a hand through his hair. Hermione was anxious about relationships in general and it made sense of course, with her mother's abandonment and Weasley's poor treatment of her. She was like a skittish animal that needed to be lured in a little at a time. He couldn't take her caution as a personal attack. He was so damn obsessed with her, so head over heels in love with her that it was hard not to. Hermione wanted to trust Draco and he wanted her to trust him. He *wanted* to provide that trust for her. Something that was extremely difficult for him to do. More so than she even realized.

Draco wanted her truths and intimate confessions too though. It thrilled him to know that he was not the only one keeping secrets, but if she shared hers would he even be able to share all of his? Draco wanted it to be her choice to share them freely. It was the only redeeming thing about him, he supposed. He wanted her to choose him because she wanted him. The only part of their relationship he also hated wanting from her, because he couldn't force it.

The irony.

Unfortunately, her consent mattered to him more than anything else. Mostly. He *could* take her unwillingly....forcing her to be his would be easy, but he wouldn't. He couldn't. He promised himself. It was so fucking tempting though. Especially today when he had to hear from Blaise that she called a meeting. Why did she ask Blaise? She took a walk this morning,

she wasn't hiding from him at least. Draco really did appreciate her little walk down the street.

He sighed again. He was brooding. Would he still have approached her on his birthday if this would be the result? He knew the answer immediately but it still fucking sucked. This whole limbo part of their relationship was more difficult than he ever imagined and he only had himself to blame. If he hadn't kissed her....It was so hard to not know what her lips felt like after that.

After that it was a struggle every minute to control himself. To reign in on his obsession. If he hadn't tried to expedite their relationship, if he hadn't tried to court her so quickly, if he could have been a normal fucking person, maybe she'd be in his lap right now. It was extremely difficult to be normal when all he wanted was Hermione to be his. *Choose me. Choose me. Choose me.* His brain begged her silently. Hermione was trying though and he would try to be patient for her. Draco looked at his watch, five till three. Hermione should be here any minute. His foot began to tap on the plush carpet.

Blaise walked into the sitting room and sat across from him.

Draco stood, "Want a drink?" He asked as he walked over to the bar cart, desperate to numb some of the guilt that began resurfacing. Two knuckles worth of whiskey at three in the afternoon was fine.

"I'm alright." Blaise said, with a bit of a tense tone. Was everyone around here stressed out?

Draco took a sip of his drink before turning slowly. "Are you alright?" Draco assessed his friend again, noticing the rigid nature of his posture. Blaise wasn't looking at him. Was that intentional?

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just ready to hear from Granger." Blaise crossed his legs.

"I'll take one of those." Theo said as he, Pansy, and Harry entered the room. Draco nodded, glancing at Harry and Pansy, both shaking their heads at the offer for a drink.

Draco handed the whiskey to Theo. They all took seats, but Draco couldn't sit. He had too much nervous energy pulsing through him. He needed to be doing something, but he didn't have anything to do so he stood and watched the wind rustle the magically preserved rose bushes out of the window. Hermione and Draco needed a date. After all their teasing and taunting, after their intense experience together the other night, they needed something normal and casual. Something lighthearted. Maybe he'd take her to McDonald's and explain why he started listening to so much muggle music.

"Do you know why she wanted to meet?" Draco asked, realizing Blaise never mentioned why Hermione was calling a meeting in the first place. He turned to his friend again, watching Blaise for what he *wasn't* saying.

"She wants our help with Azkaban." He finally met Draco's eyes. They were hard to read, his face was neutral, but still a little tight. Maybe Blaise was just tired and Draco was projecting his own issues.

“About time.” Harry sighed.

“She expects us to share our own information.” Blaise looked at Draco and Harry.

“Of course she does.” Draco sipped his drink. Slytherins were known to be transactional but Hermione Granger would best most of them.

“I want to know as well,” Pansy said. “You three are sneaky as hell.”

Draco considered how little he could tell them without making them complicit in his crimes. Not much. But it could be worth it if Hermione allowed him to help her work through the mess she was dealing with. She really needed to get over her privacy issues. Privacy was overrated.

He took a long sip of his drink, hoping it put him in a better mood before Hermione arrived. She would notice his agitation and mirror him. That was always the fucking problem with them. They kept mirroring each other’s anxiety and insecurity.

And he wanted her to be happy, so he’d be happy. He could force himself to be happy. Wait, he *was* actually happy, he realized. It wasn’t necessary to fake. Suddenly it hit him, like a spell straight to the chest, Draco was deliriously happy. Hermione hadn’t runaway after he said he loved her. She was still here, still choosing him in her own way. He was incredibly happy. Is that why he felt so on edge? Is that why he couldn’t stop feeling worried?

Hermione would be here soon. That alone eased some of the tension in his neck. Still, he couldn’t shake the discomfort running through his body. As if he’d been given an experimental dose of pepper up potion. His skin was hot and he had enough adrenaline to run a marathon. He glanced at his watch again. 3:08...

Perhaps she’d invite him over tonight. Maybe even permanently back into her bed. Yes, that would soothe his anxiety as well. Not just fucking her again, but sleeping next to her would be good for him. How did he ever sleep without her before? It was awful sleeping alone.

“Well she’s late.” Theo sighed. “Should we call her?” The excitement in Theo’s voice pulled Draco’s attention back on the group before him. “Harry has been teaching me how to use a cellphone. I want to practice.” Theo made a grabbing motion to Potter and Harry handed Theo his phone. Theo grinned as he pressed all of two buttons to make the successful phone call. Then he frowned.

“What?” Draco said, taking a step forward, the tension in his neck returning immediately.

“It went to voicemail.” Theo said. “Hello gorgeous, it’s your very best friend, Theo. And I am using a phone! Can you believe it? It’s an exciting development in my muggle lessons. Why have you never taught me before? Anyway, we are all here waiting for you. We are excited and prepared to help. And we are so grateful that you asked for help. It was so noble of you. A big step and I know-“ Theo scoffed. “That was rude. It cut me off.”

Harry chuckled and Draco smirked. Blaise checked his watch.

"What was her schedule like today?" Draco asked. He knew what it was *supposed* to be, but his clever girl tricked them often.

"She didn't say." Blaise said. "Just said she'd be back at 3."

Draco wanted to make a biting comment about Blaise doing a better job at keeping track of her, but he was trying to not be an asshole and not be so pathetic. Because he was being pathetic. He was having a pity party over nothing. It wasn't Hermione's fault Draco was an obsessive bastard. It was shocking that she hadn't tried to get a restraining order against him. Hermione had done nothing wrong. It felt so fucking pathetic to be this worked up about their relationship. So what if his witch was a few minutes late? He sighed and finally took a seat.

He sat for a full sixty seconds before he did a tracking spell.

Fifteen minutes later Draco was pacing the room as if he'd snorted caffeine.

They didn't know where she was. She wasn't at her apartment. Tracking spells found nothing, which didn't make any sense. Everyone was getting restless. Pansy had checked all Hermione's go-to cafes. Harry had apperated to her flat every five minutes. Draco called her over a dozen times, texted her twice as many, and he'd rewatched the camera security footage three times. Nothing indicated anything went wrong this morning.

Blaise sighed. "She said your mom would know where she went."

"And you're just now telling me this?" Draco snapped. "Pilly!"

"Hello, Master Draco." Pilly popped in with a flourishing bow.

"Where is my mother?" He demanded.

Pilly lifted her chin, hands on her hips. "You're being rude." Her eyes filled with tears.

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose, forcing himself to not yell at the creature. "I need help finding Hermione. Can you please get my mother immediately?"

Pilly nodded silently and left. Draco couldn't look at Blaise or else he'd say something he'd regret. Loving someone was like being yanked around on a cursed broomstick. He was so stressed and full of adrenaline, his body felt heavy and worn thin all at once. It was draining.

"Hello dear." His mother smiled. "What can I do for you?" At his mother's unhurried arrival, Draco's anger escalated.

"Where is Hermione?" Draco snapped, raising his voice. Everyone around them stopped. He rarely, if ever, took a harsh tone with his mother but his patience was a thread's width. This was Hermione, none of his normal standards of politeness mattered.

Narcissa pursed her lips. When she didn't say anything. Draco became suspicious in a way that made his pulse skip. "Where is she?" He said, quietly this time, but even harsher than before.

When Narcissa finally spoke it was patronizing as if she were speaking to a toddler, "If I tell you, you can't get upset."

"Why would I be upset, mother?" He hissed. "Just tell me." He wanted to scream at everyone. What was she doing that was so secretive?

"Promise me Draco." She insisted.

"I promise." *Lie*. He didn't promise shit.

She arched her brow unconvinced.

"This isn't funny." He snapped. Why was no one taking this seriously? The vein in his neck throbbed, his jaw ached.

She waved her wand at his feet. Instantly, they were stuck together on carpet that was both expensive and rare.

Fuck. Draco mentally prepared himself for all the possibilities, but there was only one his mind wanted to offer. His skin felt cold and his vision blurred. Hermione had left him. She'd run away and tricked him. This meeting was a distraction. The room began to spin, his heart already breaking in jagged pieces because Hermione didn't want him any more. She'd made a choice and it wasn't him. *No. No. No.* He'd fix it. He'd apologize for everything and promise to not be an asshole. Do they make classes for not being a selfish asshole? He'd make up for all of his sins. He'd do anything. Surely someone could teach him.

"Where is she?" His voice was hollow and the thread of patience he had clung to snapped as he spoke.

"She went to Azkaban." She said matter-of-factly.

The words sank into Draco like the bite of a rapid animal. He froze at first, feeling his chest tighten with shock and then he was ready to rip the animal to shreds for biting him as panic struck him like lightning.

He stayed calm though. Too calm. Narcissa Malfoy could read Draco better than anyone in the world and Draco was certain she could see the warring emotions in his face. Before he could speak, Harry shot up from his seat.

"She went where? What?" Harry said, moving closer to Draco and Narcissa.

"What is she doing there?" Pansy stood, hands on her hips. "Did she go alone? Why would she go there?"

Narcissa glanced at all of them like they were unbelievably stupid. "She's writing a book about the corruption of the prison. How does this not make sense to any of you?"

"And you knew she was going? Why did you know?" Draco asked and then turned to Blaise suddenly. "Did you fucking know?" He seethed.

"No." Blaise responded, clearly shocked by the news. Blaise was telling the truth, but there was something else he wasn't saying, something else Blaise was holding back. "She told me your mother would know and that was it. She had a portkey ready before I could get more information out of her." Blaise was looking at Draco strangely, but he didn't have time to overanalyze it or care for that matter.

Gods that witch would be the death of him. His stupidly clever witch went to fucking Azkaban. Draco rubbed his temple. "Why did you know, mother?" He repeated. "Why did she only tell you?"

"She was visiting your Lucius." Narcissa said it quietly, carefully. "I asked for a family's visitation."

Draco's whole body became hard as stone.

"What did you just say?" Draco whispered in disbelief. How dare his mother allow Hermione into that man's presence. How dare she not tell Draco. Draco was angrier with his mother than he could ever remember being in his entire life. And that was saying a lot.

"They've met many times, Draco. And you know how slow the boat rides can be. She'll show up any minute."

Draco couldn't look at his mother. He couldn't look at anyone. He felt numb and scared. "Take the sticking charm off of me." He said quietly, but it was laced with real warning. He could hardly hold himself together, he began occluding the parts of him that wanted to lash out at her. Narcissa sighed and swished her wand. Draco was moving immediately, but he only made it a few steps before Hermione appeared a few paces in front of him.

"Draco." The words were forced and full of anguish as she stumbled forward, falling to the ground. Draco leapt towards her, falling to his knees as he caught her, his arms wrapping around her waist, pulling her up to his lap. She was pale and limp in his arms. Panic consumed his entire body, like a dry field caught in a wildfire. "Hermione. Hermione." Draco didn't recognize his own voice, brittle and small. Everyone rushed towards them.

"We need a healer!" Pansy screamed.

"Find McLaggen." Hermione whispered, barely audible on her pale lips. He gripped her face and his eyes stung and he couldn't breathe. "Hermione." He repeated. He felt frozen over by his fear and panic. It was then that he felt the wetness. As he glanced down at her body, red stains bloomed against his shirt, and it was like his heart stopped completely. It was so much blood. "Draco," she choked. "You saved me." Then she went completely unconscious.

Draco hadn't spoken to anyone in the last twenty four hours since Hermione almost died in his arms. He allowed his mother to speak to the healers directly, while he listened and took note of everything they said, which wasn't much since none of them were authorized emergency medical contacts. Even Harry wasn't privy to the extent of her injuries. Anyone who dared try to get Draco's attention got his vitriol filled gaze. If they weren't going to tell him anything he didn't care to speak to them.

He hadn't left Hermione's side, luckily being in a public courtship gave their relationship credibility and they allowed him to stay in her room with her. Draco currently sat numbly, watching her chest rise and fall as the new night nurse did another scan to ensure all her vitals were stable.

When they arrived at St. Mungo's, Hermione was rushed into emergency surgery to repair the dark magic that was inside her. After her surgery, due to the long distance apparition she performed, her body had been on the verge of splinching and they placed her in a medically induced coma while her body healed from the internal wounds. That was only yesterday afternoon and yet it felt like every hour they'd been here was ten years long.

Draco was stupid to think not seeing her for ten days was torture. What was true torture, was watching her be taken away into surgery. That was when his body wanted to combust. He had no fucking control over what those surgeons did or didn't do. He wanted to be in there watching their every move. Not that he'd be able to tell if they were doing things correctly, but it felt like he could watch over her in some way. His mother must have seen his temptation to force himself into the operating room, because she pulled him away and forced him to sit down in the waiting area. Then there was the brutal moment where they came out to tell them their news. Once again only giving the barest of details for patient privacy. It didn't matter Draco was courting her, it didn't matter the Boy Wonder was her best friend, and it didn't matter how much money Narcissa offered to donate to them. They would only say she was stable, everything went well, and that she'd need to be sedated while her body healed.

So Draco laid next to her body that night, not being able to sleep a wink, just watching her chest and reminding himself she was alive.

Rise and fall. She was alive. Rise and fall. She was alive

Today around lunch his mother forced him to eat some kind of protein muffin.

Harry had texted him shortly after that he found McLaggen. Blaise was working with the aurors who were waiting for Hermione to give a statement. Blaise gave them the second wand they'd found on her body. From what little information they knew, there was a prisoner breakout while she was visiting his father. Draco had already copied the magical signature from the wand she had. He didn't recognize it, but as soon as the nurse left, he'd know the truth.

The nurse swished his wand and the scans disappeared, "Everything is still stable, I won't be back in for another couple of hours. I've decreased all her sedation, although she's still on a mild pain potion. Her injuries have healed well though and tomorrow morning she should wake up." Draco nodded. He didn't know what else to do. He wanted to ask what exactly those injuries were, what spells were used on her, how she managed not to tear her body in half from apparating, but he knew what the answer was. *That is not information we are allowed to disclose.* The nurse quietly left and Draco couldn't help wishing he'd done everything differently from the very beginning of his time with her.

Draco stood and cast several privacy charms around Hermione's room. It wouldn't take long, but being interrupted was not an option. Crossing this line was wrong. Something he

promised he wouldn't do. He wanted it to be her choice and his guilt for doing it was stronger than he anticipated, but Draco needed answers more than he needed to feel good about himself. He needed the truth. When she woke, because she *would* wake there was no other fucking option, he wanted to have the truth even if she planned to lie. He'd let her lie. He didn't care anymore about her secrets. It was overwhelming to think about what could have happened yesterday. All the what if's were a constant parade in his mind. More than anything he wished he would have just stopped trying to rush her feelings, because he realized now, how much he'd pushed her away. If he'd just been patient with her, even if it was fake and forced, maybe she would have asked him to come with her to Azkaban. This was his fault. This was all his fault. And he would fix it. He kissed her lips and then her forehead and then he closed his eyes and as painlessly as possible, slipped into her mind.

Draco knew her mind would be incredible, but seeing it made him burst with pride. Hermione was magnificent. There was also pride because he was fucking right. She was a natural occlumens. Her mind was a library. *Of course it was.* Rows and rows and rows of towering shelves were filled with books and filing cabinets, some overflowing with parchment. *His perfect witch.* Draco was extremely tempted to find his own book or filing cabinet. Perhaps he even had his own shelf. That would bolster his ego, but he had to remain focused on his task. The deeper a person went into someone's psyche the more difficult it was on both of them, especially when not offered willingly. He didn't want her to feel any impact from his intrusion, although it seemed like her subconscious was very inviting to him. Draco could feel the acceptance of his presence almost immediately and it was most likely due to the medications she was on, but it made him happy nonetheless. He found her visit to Askaban easily, it was labeled in her loopy script, and as soon as he touched the black book he slipped into the memory.

Draco watched as the water colored image of Hermione played Blaise like a fiddle. Blaise constantly underestimated her. Draco would have dove straight over that desk and tackled her as she used the portkey. And Hermione knew that. Which is why she waited till Blaise was supposed to be with her.

He watched with unbearable jealousy as McLaggen approached her on the dock.

Hermione trusted McLaggen, in a way she didn't trust Draco and that made him feel like shit. He stood next to the memory version of her and wished so badly he could go back in time and redo everything. From the first time he spoke to her, to the time he became her personal investigator, he could have offered his support differently. He had given her a half assed attempt at support when he was her friend, but the moment she really needed it, he took it back. He knew who Hermione Granger was and instead of moving with her, he lied and tried to stop her from being who she was. He was an idiot. All of his mistakes were glaringly obvious now and hindsight was a bitch.

Draco was unprepared for how it would feel to be back at Azkaban, even if it wasn't real, it had a physical effect on his body. He shivered and his stomach twisted violently. It'd been years and yet, he remembered exactly how brutal this place was. The memory in front of him

blurred and he forced himself to breathe as he refocused on the scene. He had to force himself to compartmentalize so he could keep his magical tether to her mind.

Hermione was still effortlessly brave, smart, and independent. All the things he loved about her. He watched with pride as she spoke to the guards, forcing them to give her his father's mail. Hermione walked the halls of Azkaban like she owned the place. When McLaggen left her, Draco was surprised. He assumed they would be together the whole time.

As much as he was unprepared for being back at Azkaban he was even more unprepared to see his father. Draco hadn't seen his father in over four years and he didn't care about his injuries, but his stomach tightened regardless. Perhaps it was Hermione's emotions he was feeling in the memory, her turmoil. Yes, it was hers he decided, because he didn't care about his father at all. Lucius Malfoy could rot in here forever for all he cared. But what the fuck was a fluffernutter?

He waited with baited breath to see how his father responded to Hermione, how they interacted together. And of all the things he expected it wasn't them sitting down to make a fucking art project. Was this actually a memory? Or some weird dream she had? Was her coma influencing the original memory? Everything he knew about legilimency told him the potions would help his intrusion and keep her comfortable. There wasn't a risk to her being here.

Draco continued watching, his brow furrowed in confusion. His father's mocking, condescending tone irritated him. *How dare he speak to her like that.* Hermione didn't balk at it. She pushed back as they made a caterpillar? Then they were standing and playing catch! *Catch!* His father was mostly snarling and snapping at her, but Draco felt like there was part of Lucius that enjoyed being around Hermione. This had to be some nightmare. They were playing catch and he kept calling her a fluffernutter. This was ludacris. This wasn't real. When had his father ever played catch with Draco? Draco was about to leave the memory and restart his search for the actual memory, but Hermione asked about The Brotherhood.

Draco stilled and listened intently as they spoke. His father's mockery made him want to punch him, but when he heard his own name being brought up, Draco swallowed hard, his mouth dry as clay. This was a different type of invasion than he intended. He didn't know they would talk about him. He really hadn't thought about what they'd talk about at all, but he also never imagined his father playing catch with Hermione Granger.

Draco wasn't sure he wanted to hear Hermione's thoughts about Draco at the moment. Especially after his confessions to her, add on the guilt he was experiencing, he might be too-

"The boy has always been so sensitive." Well fuck you too, father.

Hermione's response had Draco chuckling. He moved closer to her. She was so beautiful and she didn't let Lucius Malfoy walk all over her. So much braver than Draco could ever be. He wished more than ever that he could have been here to witness this.

"You'll ruin our bloodline."

Draco's blood chilled.

What the fuck did he just say to her? He turned to face his father and then his head jerked to Hermione. He watched as they spoke about their future.

Courting. Marriage. Children.

Fuck yes. He wanted all of it with her. Even if she was saying those things just to taunt Lucius, Draco didn't care. Hearing her talk about it so confidently with his father made him love her even more. *Choose me. Choose me. Choose me.* It just needed to be her choice, he didn't care about her motivations.

"Marry me in spite of my father, Hermione. Marry me to piss him off." He whispered to her.

Draco's mind was racing with flashes of their future together. Hermione, marrying him. Hermione's swollen stomach, pregnant with a child. Hermione, with wrinkled skin and grey curls, snuggled beside him in bed while they read.

Then he heard his father's offer.

Yep, he wanted to kill him. It was Hermione's laughter that grounded him, helped him keep that tether to her mind. Pride once again filled his body when she said, "*Draco would give me double if I only asked.*" Damn right he would. In fact he made a mental note to just transfer funds to her as soon as possible. He'd give her all of it if she wanted. Every galleon in every vault. Every property they owned. Every investment they had. It could all be hers.

Draco's stomach sank like lead as his father changed tactics. Fear was always his favorite tool and Draco could tell this one worked on Hermione.

My life means nothing compared to yours. Don't listen to him, Hermione. Don't leave me. Draco wanted to get on his knees and fucking beg her right there.

He watched them argue over Draco's safety and it did not comfort him at all.

Fuck his father. Fuck this asinine conversation.

Oh and now fuck Anthony Goldstein for getting so close to his wife. Yes. Draco liked that term very much. *My witch. My wife. Mine.*

For the first time in years he was grateful to his father, because even when he was chained to the ground, Draco saw his movement for what it was. Protection. Hmm. That made him feel...strange. It was good to know his father didn't trust Goldstein.

Do you really have to flirt with him though, Hermione? Gods she was so good at this whole sneaking around thing. She really belonged in slytherin. Well no. It was glaringly obvious why she wasn't in Slytherin. There wasn't a single bone of self preservation in her. Whereas Draco had the complete opposite problem. Self preservation was the single driving force in his life. It's why he could lie so easily. It's why he could always manipulate a situation in his favor. How he advised Hermione to play truth or dare all those months ago, was how Draco played life. And the woman he loved more than anyone else in the world was his complete

opposite. She ran away from the safety of self preservation, straight towards the wild risks of bravery and independence.

All of his previous gratitude for his father disappeared instantly.

Marry me for the money Hermione, I don't fucking care!

And then she said the words that made the whole room blur and shake, threatening to pull him out of the memory entirely.

"I do love him."

She loves him. She loves him.

He closed his eyes, only able to hear the slam of his heart against his chest. He was so jealous of his father. Why did Lucius get to hear this first?

She loves him. She loves him.

He didn't think he cared that much to hear her say it, but holy fuck was it incredible.

"Courtships are hard for me to understand and Draco wasn't exactly truthful with me when he explained it."

Draco's eyes shot open. *Oh. Fuck. Oh. Fuck.* He glanced at his father's expression and hated how happy he looked. Draco began pacing. Was this it? Was this where he convinced her to leave him? Or attack her? He wouldn't hesitate to kill his father. Not for a single second.

His head swung back and forth as they argued and negotiated. Truthfully, Draco couldn't speak to his father without yelling at him, so watching Hermione stand her ground so beautifully was seriously satisfying. It also made him feel so...was he feeling guilty again? Fuck. Those images of their time in Paris weighed heavily on him. And that other thing he had to figure out how to tell her about. He thought this all would be a lot more simple...

"Yes. I'll be selfish." Hermione left the room and Draco was dragged with her.

What does that mean? What kind of selfish would she be? Would Draco be involved?

And then suddenly his witch was being hurt and Draco felt like he'd been kicked in the chest.

He wanted to vomit. He wanted to rip the man to pieces with his bare hands.

Draco had to remind himself that she was safe now, regardless of the damage the man had inflicted. This was only a memory. This was the real reason Draco violated her privacy. He needed to see who hurt her. And once he saw this man's face and name tag that's all that he needed. He could leave now and already be on his way. But he couldn't leave her. Even if it wasn't real and it was just her own memory, he didn't want her to endure this alone.

“I’m here Hermione.” He hadn’t realized he’d begun to cry until he spoke and the salty taste of his tears hit his lips. “I’m right here baby. You’re not alone. You’re safe. You’re going to be safe. I love you. I love you so fucking much.” He moved closer to her, not taking his eyes off her. The fear etched in her face was wrecking him. Draco reached out to the blurry version of her and felt nothing but air. Another tear streamed down his cheek and he gritted his teeth, while he watched her agony, wishing he had done everything differently so he could have been here with her. Then she struck the guard. Hard and fast. The image was moving quickly and fading now. Hermione screamed through the halls, prisoners rushed out of their cells and Draco could distinctly hear his father’s voice calling out for her. Draco hoped Lucius got punched in the face and his legs snapped in half by the other prisoners roaming around. The fucker tried to send Hermione away and bribe her to leave him. He could fucking rot in hell.

The last bit of the memory was the hardest to watch. She was dying, her life was being drained before his eyes. The dark magic was visibly apparent in her body, her skin became pale and almost green. Blood seeped through her fingers and soaked into her clothes as she clutched her stomach and held both wands in the other hand. Fierce determination shone through her eyes as she began to apparate and it made Draco want to fucking sob.

Even on the brink of death she was so brave and beautiful.

Then he heard his name on her lips as she disappeared into the air and he did begin to cry in earnest then. He slipped out of the memory and vowed to do everything in his power to make things easier on her. To give her everything and anything she ever could ever want.

Draco sat for several minutes after leaving Hermione’s mind, letting everything settle inside him before he texted Harry. Normally, he’d be asking Potter to join him on this kind of outing, but Draco wanted this all for himself. He held her hand and repeated his prayer.

“I love you, Hermione.” He whispered. He needed to tell her more often. He needed to tell her everyday all day long. No. wait. He was trying to not be a smothering asshole. Fuck. How was he supposed to do this? He didn’t know how to be normal. All his first reactions were overreactions. Could he ever love her and not be overbearing?

Harry arrived and Draco kissed Hermione’s forehead.

“Don’t leave for a single second. I’ll know if you do.” Draco warned. The first words he’d spoken to anyone since Hermione appeared in the sitting room. Theo followed in shortly after along with Pansy.

Pansy was puffy eyed and sniffling still. She hadn’t stopped crying since Hermione went into surgery. It had been a hard time for everyone. They all got his warning regardless, because empathy was not a strong suit of his. Hermione wasn’t allowed to be left alone for any amount of time. Two people should always remain in the room. He added extra protection spells before he left.

Draco did not want to leave, but he had to leave. That fucker Branson wouldn’t be allowed to breathe for much longer.

Draco watched as Branson sat down at his kitchen table pulling a plate of pasta in front of him. The flat he lived in was drab and worn down, the man must have been desperate for money. That didn't stop Draco from stabbing a knife into the man's hand. Then another in his other arm so he was effectively trapped against the cheap wood.

Branson jerked as Draco leaned in closer to the man, "Fuck muggle borns!" Branson's breathing was ragged.

"Any last words before you die?" Draco narrowed his eyes on the man.

"She deserved a lot worse!" Branson spit the words out. Draco dove into the man's mind and made it hurt like hell.

An hour later Draco stood over the man's body. Fuck. He meant to take it slow. He meant to enjoy it. He meant to...but now, the man was barely alive. His face had been smashed in, unrecognizable now, it looked more like minced meat than a human face. His arms, broken every place there was to break, reminded Draco of broken glass. The pieces of bone that protruded out of the man's body were splintered. Draco had also cut off his feet. That was the first thing he did actually. The man couldn't run away without feet and Draco also wanted the man to know what it was like to be held captive. Okay so maybe Draco had enjoyed it. It was satisfying, but he really didn't mean to do everything so fast. Draco hadn't been irrational though, he'd searched through the man's mind and that was the true cause of his outburst. That stopped him from being able to take anything slow. What he found there made his anger turn into feral rage.

Anger was still flooding his body. This wasn't enough. This wasn't nearly enough. Everyone involved needed to pay for this twisted game. Draco became frenzied with need to return to Hermione. He sighed and grabbed his wand, repairing the man's body. It was an ugly repair and he didn't allow the man any pain relief, but Draco also had to cover his near-murder scene, before he actually murdered the man.

Once the man was normal looking, Draco cleaned the mess up and shoved enough cocaine up the man's nose to give him a heart attack. He watched as the man struggled and panicked, as he silently screamed. And all Draco could think was that he deserved so much worse. Draco made all signs of the drugs in his system disappear and left without so much as one second of regret. Is this the kind of truth Hermione wanted? Certainly not.

Draco decided as he walked away from the dark neighborhood that he'd only lie by omission now. If she wanted to know, she had to specifically ask. That way she could decide how much truth she got. This had to be an improvement in his moral standards. Prior to this night he had hardly any qualms to lying. Yes, this was indeed an improvement.

He was still lost in his thoughts when he landed in an alley a block away from St. Mungos. Coming face to face with himself.

"Hello." Draco said to him.

Draco steadied himself. Had he already taken Hermione? Were they infiltrating the hospital? The imposter didn't move to grab his wand, just stood there, staring at him, a mocking smirk on his face.

"What do you want?" Draco asked. Occluding really came in handy at times like this. He felt unreasonably calm.

"Oh come on, that's obvious." The imposter grinned at him. Did Draco look like that when he smiled? Gods he hoped not.

"I don't like to make assumptions." Draco replied, shrugging a shoulder.

"Leave her." The ugly Draco demanded with a seriously ugly smile. "Break up with her. Break her heart as thoroughly as possible and make her believe you don't want anything to do with her." What the fuck was it with people trying to break up Hermione and Draco? Was it some holiday he missed on his calendar?

"And if I did that?" Draco asked. "Then what happens? You swoop in and save the day?" Who the fuck was this person? There had to be some kind of mannerism or posture that could indicate who this fucker was.

"No, I'll do you one even better and leave her alone." The imposter took a step forward. Draco didn't move a muscle. His eyes stayed completely locked on the man. Why did he look so fucking ugly? Did the imposter make Draco look ugly on purpose? Was this part of the intimidation tactic? To make Draco question himself? Because if so, it was working. The man continued, taunting Draco, waving a hand in the air. "All of this can be over. No more threats. No more explosions. No more guards hunting Hermione in the halls of Azkaban. How is she by the way?" The fucker frowned feigning sadness. "Do you think she'll ever have children?"

"So I break her heart and you go away? How would I know for certain that you'd stay true to your word?" Draco asked.

"Well as long as you stay away, I stay away." He responded, jaw clenching. "But if you don't, then we have a problem."

"So this isn't a choice, but a threat?"

The off-putting man smiled again. "There is a choice. You both get freedom in one scenario. That's the one I'd choose. The one where you break up with her and you're both free. If you don't break up with her, I'll force you out. Hermione needs to be freed from you. Is Branson dead? That's what you were doing right? Being a monster?. How Hermione could ever care for a vile person like you is outstanding. To her credit she's always cared for even the lowliest of creatures. She takes pity on animals, it makes sense she'd see you as a pet project." He smirked.

Draco huffed a laugh. "The thing is, I think she likes my *animalistic* tendencies. Fucking her like an animal usually keeps her quite happy."

The imposter's expression fell, as if Draco had smacked it off of him. "You don't deserve her!" The ugly man screeched.

"I agree." Draco shrugged. "But just out of curiosity, who does deserve her? Is there someone that should have her?"

The man barely controlled his rage. "Yes, yes there is a whole list that are better than you!"

"Anyone in particular?" Draco arched his brow. "I'd love to know who my competition is."

"Stop playing fucking games. You aren't taking this seriously. Break up with Hermione. Leave her alone and she's safe. It should be an easy decision. Don't break up with her and I'll take you out of the picture." He snapped. "And no I won't kill you, I'll make you miserable as fuck." He waved a hand at his body. "You'll start fucking witches and sending the evidence to Hermione, if that doesn't work, you'll start killing people in public, then—"

Draco exhaled. "I'm taking this extremely seriously. I promise you that. Now if you'll excuse me." Draco apparated behind the wizard. The ugly Draco twisted around, grabbing his wand, expecting a fight.

"I'll let you know what I decide." Draco said as he walked away, keeping his steps slow and unhurried.

The imposter shouted. "You have until December thirty-first. Make it hurt her!"

Draco's magic was crackling at his fingertips when he reached the doors of the hospital. Once inside he burst into a sprinting run. He needed to see Hermione. He needed to assure himself she was safe and alive. When the lift was taking too long, he took the four flights of stairs, not wanting to wait a second.

It was a struggle to not burst through the door when he arrived at her room, but he didn't want to disturb her. When he saw her there, sleeping and perfectly safe, he almost fainted with relief. Harry and Theo stood as he walked inside the room, moving directly next to Hermione. Pansy was slumped on the other side of bed, half asleep.

"Everything good?" Harry asked. Pansy stirred, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

"Everything went great." Draco replied, still reeling from the conversation with his ugly twin. Draco ran his hand through his hair. "I'm exhausted." His kind way of saying get the fuck out of here. They all got the hint and said their goodbyes. Draco changed his clothes in the adjoined bathroom, then expanded Hermione's bed and laid beside her. The hospital staff would just have to get used to his presence. He wasn't leaving her anymore. How could he? He probably should have shared the information with their friends, Harry at minimum, but he needed time to think. He needed to process the offer and what it meant.

Draco spent an inappropriate amount of time staring at Hermione. Then he prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed, repeating his prayer over and over and over as if it held the answers to the universe.

If there was one thing he knew for certain no one was taking her away from him. He didn't need the prayer to know that, he just needed Hermione on board. Draco knew he wouldn't accept the offer, but worried if *she* would. She'd gotten a similar offer, not quite the same, but now? Now that Draco's life and reputation were on the line? After the threats his father made to her about his life? He worried that when he told everyone about the conversation she'd leave to keep him safe. To keep them both safe. He couldn't lie about this. It directly involved her safety and he just fucking promised himself he going to be a better person. The universe was conspiring against him. Was he destined to always be a fucked up bastard?

Fuck. Loving someone this much felt impossible, like he was always too vulnerable and always on the verge of making the wrong decision. He finally closed his eyes, listening to her slow breaths, trying to figure out what the fuck he should do.

Maybe if he leaned into things he loved about her, he could use them to his advantage. She was wicked smart. He loved this about her. She sought logic.

Draco considered every angle of the stalker's offer. How could he make this work for him? How could Draco show Hermione that he was the only logical choice? Instead of forcing himself as the only option, he could demonstrate the flaws in the other options.

But he'd been going about it the wrong way. He needed to consider how to make Hermione trust him. Fuck. That was the answer wasn't it? If he wanted her to choose him, he had to trust her to choose him. This entire time Draco was waiting for Hermione to trust him, while Hermione was waiting for Draco to trust her. Neither of them wanted to go first. Neither of them wanted to be vulnerable like that. Draco didn't have to tell her everything. Not all at once. That would be a disaster. She'd leave him before he could explain everything. He couldn't tell if he was being manipulative or empathetic. He was certainly still being selfish. He was prioritizing his needs after all and he needed Hermione.

Gods kidnapping sounded so much easier.

Chapter 29

Hermione was kissing Draco, slowly. It was delicious. It reminded her of the candy shop nearby her childhood home that would pull taffy in the large window. Their lips stretched apart, while still remaining connected, barely partly before smooshing back together. It was utterly decadent and richly sweet. These tender kisses were unbelievably perfect. She could do this forever. She wanted this forever.

“You have to go home, Hermione.” Draco pulled away. “We have to stop.” He sounded like he only mildly believed what he said.

“No.” She curled herself smaller into his lap. “I want to stay with you. I love you.”

He sighed, frustration evident, making Hermione want to cry. “You don’t love me?”

“I love you so fucking much it should scare you.”

“Then kiss me, you prat!” She smacked his chest.

“Hermione.” His voice was strained.

“Touch me Draco” She begged, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“What the bloody fuck as I supposed to do with you?” He looked at the ceiling.

“Kiss me. Touch me. Fuck me.”

He growled and before he could say anything else Hermione kissed him again and he didn’t stop her. He was vigorous and demanding, kissing her and touching her with fervor. She rocked against him. “I want to fuck you. Right now.”

“You have to leave.” Draco said, his forehead leaning against hers, although his wandering hand up her leg left Hermione unconvinced.

“You don’t want me to leave.” Hermione whispered.

“We shouldn’t be doing any of this.” He said, his eyes locked on hers.

Hermione sighed, pouting her lips. “So you just want to be my friend?”

“No. I don’t want to be your friend. I want so much more Hermione but... I’m a coward, so instead of trying to approach you, I hide and I watch you.”

“Aww! Like a secret admirer.” She grinned. He was so lovely, a little cold but beautiful, like a lonely garden that just needed some sunshine on it.

Draco huffed a laugh, “Something like that, but you’re going to hate me if I keep touching you. If I keep kissing you.” He trailed a finger down her arm.

“I don’t hate you, I lo—“ he pressed his fingers against her mouth.

“Stop saying that.”

“Why? You said it to me.”

“Yes, because I actually love you, but you’re not of sound mind at the moment. Which is why we need to get you home.”

The dream suddenly shifted fading into pink and purple swirls, jolting her entire body.

Her eyes blinked open, dim lights glowed along a white ceiling. Slowly the sounds around her became louder. Then as if being stuck in a downpour of rain, her memories of Azkaban flooded her mind. Silent tears streamed down her face, the soreness of her abdominal muscles reminding her that she really had been that close to dying. It was real. All of it.

“Hermione.” A feminine voice called from somewhere in the room. “My name is Healer Wells. When you’re ready, I’d like you to slowly sit up.”

Hermione followed instructions. Theo, Pansy, and Harry stood at the end of the hospital bed, all three attempting to hold back their emotions, but doing it poorly. An elderly witch with thick black framed glasses stood beside them watching her. “Hello Hermione. You’re safe. I’ve recently turned off all sedation. You might feel a little dizzy and confused, it’s normal. You’re perfectly safe.” Her words were stated as sterily as the room. Hermione wanted to compare the woman to Narcissa, but even Narcissa carried more maternal warmth than she did.

“Where’s Draco?” Hermione’s heart raced.

“I’m right here.” His voice was low and calm, she whipped towards him, much too quickly and her head spun. He was to the left of her, standing a few paces away from her bed. It was instinctual to move towards him, not for any reason other than needing the comfort of his body around hers.

He saved her life. He saved her life. She wanted to burst with the explanation, but the words to describe it scared her.

Draco was there in an instant half kneeling on the floor beside her bed when she threw her arms around his neck. Hermione cried as he held her.

“Draco.” She said into his shoulder. She didn’t even know what else to say. His name felt like a prayer on her lips.

“I’m right here.” He repeated, undisturbed by her overwhelming feelings.

He pulled away just slightly to look at her. One hand slid against her face, brushing her hair. She kissed him before thinking about their audience. It was brief, but earnest. She wanted to kiss him again but Healer Wells cleared her throat.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling well. I'd like to speak to you privately now about the extent of your injuries." The witch's emphasis on privately didn't go unnoticed by anyone in the room. Hermione cleared her throat, "I will tell my friends everything anyway, you can tell them whatever you tell me."

Draco sat next to on the bed, holding her hand as if to confirm Hermione's statement that he wasn't leaving. The healer stood there silently observing the two of them. Hermione could tell by the way the witch looked at Draco that she wasn't fond of him, which put made Hermione less inclined to like the healer. The healer pursed her lips, a sign she wasn't going to concede that easily to Hermione's wishes.

"We have done our very best to protect your privacy Miss Granger. Are you certain you don't want to hear alone first? You can relay the information as you see fit at a later time." The healer gave her a look that she supposed was to communicate 'you don't' want this information to be shared'. Harry's face was sullen, Theo's held a rare serious expression, and Pansy's swollen eyes told her how much she'd been crying. Then Hermione glanced at Draco, even he, could barely hide the strain of worry in his eyes from her. Hermione furrowed her brow.

"Do they not know what happened to me? How long have I been sedated?" Hermione shook her head. "I made Pansy my emergency contact. I-I-"

"I told you!" Pansy snapped at the healer. "I told you I was her emergency contact!"

"We follow our protocols." The healer said, primly. "We've been sending digital copies of your medical records to your appointed medical emergency contact, Ronald Weasley."

"What the actual fuck?" Theo scoffed.

"You've been updating Ron?" Harry, who generally remained level headed in conflict with other professionals, looked genuinely offended. "Do you see him in this room? Do you see him anywhere near her?" Harry spat.

"I don't ever remember adding his name to my records. Not even when we dated. It was Pansy, Theo, Harry, or my father. Depending on the situation." Hermione frowned.

"I'm just relaying information that is legally binding. We can't disclose information without your consent and as you've been in a coma for the last thirty six hours we couldn't get your consent."

"But if you would have told them Ron was my emergency contact they could have spoken with him to rectify the problem." Hermione insisted.

"Mister Weasley has been very busy and wished to remain informed and notified when you were awake, he should be here soon."

"No!" Hermione, Theo, and Harry said all at once.

Pansy said, "Like fucking hell he will."

Draco remained quiet and calm, keeping hold of Hermione's hand, a thumb stroking against her skin. "Well I'd like to change it right now." Hermione stated emphatically. "Draco Malfoy. Put his name down." Draco's hand stilled in hers.

The healer arched an unimpressed brow, "I think we should hold off on any changes until you've been awake longer than ten minutes. If you insist we speak publicly that's your choice." The healer glanced down at the parchment she held. Her voice becoming more cold than Hermione could believe was possible, "You were on the verge of splinching when you arrived. The internal pressure of your body was something I'd never witnessed before, and I've been a healer a long time. Your organs were tearing apart and because of the dark magic and other wounds to your abdomen, you were hemorrhaging blood so severely it is honestly a miracle you survived at all." The healer looked at Hermione to ensure she comprehended the severity. "We are still unsure what spell was used on you. It was ancient and obscure. I'm not sure if we will ever know for certain. We were able to reverse most of the damage." *M ost.* That word hung in the air like a guillotine blade, waiting to decide Hermione's fate. The healer glanced around the room, before speaking again. "The spell was essentially attempting a hysterectomy, a foul, barbaric attempt at one. If it had been completed, the spell would have turned your reproductive organs into stone. Your right ovary had to be removed completely due to the spell." Hermione let the words slice through, feeling mostly numb at the news and the implications for her future. "You'll have decreased fertility, but the remaining ovary was untouched and completely healthy. Your uterus was beginning to solidify but we caught the spell in time and reversed the damage. Every scan has revealed stable function and no signs of regrowth. You'll be sent home on a regular medication to prevent infection or regrowth for the next several months."

"I already had irregular menstrual cycles." Hermione wiped a tear on her cheek. "My personal healers said it could be genetic because my mother spent years trying to get pregnant. I was the one and only child she could carry to term. How much more will this impact me?" Hermione said feeling a strange grief swell inside her.

The door opened, interrupting the discussion. "Mr Weasley is here." A nurse said.

"I'll deal with it." Pansy stomped through the door.

"I'll go with her." Harry said, chasing after her.

"Me too." Theo sighed.

The healer glanced at the nurse, "Ryan, would you take Mr. Malfoy and add him as the emergency contact for Miss Granger?"

"Of course." Ryan replied. Draco glanced between the healer and Hermione, Draco didn't like the healer either and Hermione could see the internal debate he had about leaving her alone with the witch.

"Go." Hermione squeezed his hand. His silence was a little unnerving, he typically didn't balk at speaking up. Draco nodded and followed the nurse out of the room, glancing at her before entering the hall.

The healer closed the door and handed her a parchment. Hermione glanced down at the paper.

“This is why I wanted privacy.” The healer’s tone shifted, almost conspiratorially.

Hermione scanned the paper, ingesting the information with consternation. It was like chewing on glass. Harsh and painful.

“How recently?” She asked, looking at the scans of her brain. She wasn’t a trained healer, but her research and personal experience allowed her a very large amount of knowledge on the subject.

“The most recent one was probably mid April. The others are older, harder to date.”

“How many times have I been obliterated?” Hermione’s lip trembled, she choked on questions. Saying the words aloud made it worse. Chewing on glass was painful, but swallowing it, accepting it, was excruciating.

“At least five, but probably more, upwards of ten times. Obliteration science isn’t the most studied subject, but we know that the brain becomes a little scarred from continuous use of the spell. Each obliviation leaves a small mark on the brain in the area that deals with memory. It’s almost invisible to most scans, but when repeatedly used the individual marks tend to bleed together creating a larger scar. It makes it easier to measure how many times it occurred. We measure the scar for a rough estimate of the amount of times it was used.”

Hermione rubbed her temples wishing for memories she didn’t know were missing. Her brain was her most precious asset, her sacred space, her haven amongst all the terror of the world. It was the cornerstone of her identity. Her mind was the thing that made her who she was. Even the notion that someone else was messing with her brain made her want to vomit. The fact that she’d been obliterated multiple times threatened to shake her mental state.

“I can’t recover the memories unless the caster returns them.” Hermione stated. She knew how it worked. She knew how violating it was. She knew how difficult it was to take someone’s memories and how much skill was necessary to return them. All parts of obliviation were difficult, but if done badly, there could be irreparable damage.

“Correct.” The healer looked at her sympathetically. The first sign the woman had real emotions. “I’d be careful who you share this information with Miss Granger. They might be using it against you. It’s concerning to me that it’s been done so many times.”

Hermione’s body felt distant from her, like she was hearing things from far away.

“How can I begin to recover them? What can I do to trigger them?”

The healer sat on the edge of the bed. “Sometimes the memories are triggered by smells, words spoken in a certain way, or being in the same places, but it’s not a guaranteed way to recover them because your brain doesn’t know it’s missing. Obliteration is a powerful magic. It’s not only powerful, but harsh on the body as well. The brain cannot look for what it doesn’t know is gone. You can start by thinking about times in your life where you might feel

an unusual amount of confusion, where your memories feel blurry, or even where the opposite is true and things were almost too simple, too easy. Consider decisions you made that didn't quite make sense to those around you, but made perfect sense to you at the time.”

“Did everything else look okay?” Hermione was almost afraid to ask and the ache in her throat made it hard to speak.

“Yes.” The healer said. “Everything else on your scans were excellent. I’d recommend getting regular scans though. Just to ensure your function remains stable and that no more oblivaiton scars pop up.”

Hermione wanted to scream. *Not her brain. Not her brain.* She couldn’t lose her mind. Hermione’s stomach sank. She was only receiving the karma of what she did to her mother. There was a good reason why her mother hated her. Anything could have happened to her brain. *Anything.* Gods. Okay. Okay. she needed to ground herself. She wanted Draco back with her.

An icy shiver slid down her spine. Had Draco obliterated her? Would his reasons for doing so be worth the risks?

She didn’t know what to think or how to feel.

As if summoned by her thoughts the door rattled. The healer had locked the door apparently upon his exit. The part of her that didn’t trust Draco and the part that overwhelmingly loved him were at war inside herself. The healer patted her hand, “Be careful.” She headed towards the door. Hermione folded the parchment and tucked it into her beaded bag on the table next to her bed. The healer opened the door for Draco and he moved quickly to her side again. “I’ll send in the nurse for another scan and then we will observe you for most of the day. As long as everything looks okay and you feel alright we will be able to discharge you this evening. It’s important for you to get some rest today and for the next week, letting your body recover from the trauma you experienced is important for all aspects of recovery.” Hermione nodded as the healer left, but could barely focus on anything other than trying to remember things she didn’t remember. When was she confused? When did something not make sense to other people? Her heart beat faster, her breathing became short.

“Hermione.” Draco’s voice stopped her from succumbing to the panic. She turned to him waiting for his lecture, for his anger to explode all over her. He held his head down, wringing his hands together. She didn’t know if she could handle his disappointment right now, but she already had a plan for anyone who wanted to lecture her about Azkaban. She clenched her back teeth, waiting for him to continue. Stress lined his furrowed brow, his lips stayed parted as if waiting for the words to come out. He finally looked at her. “I love you. I love you so much.” His lip trembled, his voice breaking as he spoke. Hermione’s own throat bobbed, but before she could respond the nurse knocked on her door.

“Hello, I have your emergency contact paperwork here, I need your signature Miss Granger.” The nurse handed her the papers, “There are a few spaces missing, there and there.”

“Of course.” Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat, forcing herself to focus and compartmentalize the growing number of emotions she was carrying.

Draco shifted next to her as she read the line that was empty.

Relation to patient _____

"I didn't know what to put. It asked for it twice." Draco stood and walked away, presumably to not put any pressure on her. Hermione watched him as he turned away. How to describe someone you loved, didn't trust because they certainly broke every personal boundary she could think of and still believed might be your soulmate? Almost dying certainly put things into perspective for how Hermione felt about Draco, but trusting him seemed scarier than ever before.

"Well that's an easy answer." Hermione said. "Exercise partner seems obvious." Draco turned around hesitantly as if surprised by her playful attitude. It was a coping mechanism for her and he probably knew that. For the first time the lines between his brows lessened. "Or should I put number one fan instead?" She smiled at him, hoping it eased more of the tension in his body. He finally smirked at her. "Whatever you deem as appropriate is fine by me." He turned back around and Hermione wrote down the only word she felt enveloped their relationship. It was presumptuous on her part. It was bold, despite how much her brain was panicking about being obliterated, she still loved him and she still held...hope. That's what she felt. Hope that he'd tell her the truth, no matter what the truth was. The word she chose didn't make any legal sense either, so she flipped the paper over and created a list of alternative names for any legal person to question it and signed her name. She'd have to change it at some point but for now that would do. She handed the paper back to the nurse with a silly smile. She'd share it with Draco when the timing was right. After they had the long overdue conversation they needed to have.

"The physical therapist will be here soon to walk you through precautions and helpful exercises for your abdominal muscles." The nurse nodded.

And that began the rotating door of healers and administration personnel all day long. Harry came back briefly to update her that Ron was incredibly upset but left, saying he'd be back with lawyers. Pansy and Theo both came in briefly to hug her, but they could tell it was busy and said they'd see her after she was discharged. Hermione informed all the staff Ron wasn't to be allowed in her room. Not until she could be certain she was ready to face whatever emotional response he had. Surely visiting Azkaban made him very upset. His finances were heavily involved in this.

Draco was a silent observer, he sat beside her or in a corner out of the way, his eyes were always on her. Hermione was grateful. Unbelievably grateful. She didn't have to explain anything to him. He was just there and it grounded her, it helped her stay above the overwhelm from all the different things going through her mind. The medical providers that came into her room to scan her, touch her, scan her, check the scar on her abdomen, give her potions, scan her again, and then tell her to get some rest just for another person to walk through the door with paperwork that needed to be completed immediately. By the time the potion's master walked her through the potion regimen she'd be on for the next several months, it was almost dinner time. Hermione finally found time to change her clothes and felt like a new person as she exited the bathroom. She still desperately wished for a shower, but it was a great surprise to find her body didn't feel too sore, even though she could feel the

exhaustion of the day beginning to sink to her bones. It was then, when the three aurors came into her room that Hermione was most grateful for Draco's presence. Like a silent wolf, he made his presence known, as he moved directly next to her on the bed, guarding her and grounding her all at once. She didn't recognize the wizards that stood before her. Draco rested a hand on her thigh, as she recounted the events of the day in Azkaban. She explained in brief, fact-based statements. If Draco was surprised that she visited his father or was hurt by the guard he didn't show it. His face was a cold mask and his vicious grey eyes were glued to the men interrogating her.

"It's unfortunate that we can't verify the statements you've given us." The one named Mantzen said. "And you'll be brought in to be officially charged based on your interference in the prison." He growled.

"She what?" Draco hissed. "She was a victim and you're planning to persecute her?"

Auror Smith spoke next, "She intentionally opened the cells of dangerous criminals. She could have called for help in numerous ways. Why is that the route she chose? Perhaps she wanted to help your father escape?" The mustachioed man glared at Draco.

Draco laughed, callously, "If that were the case I would have put him back myself."

Auror Mantzen, "Like I said, we can't verify the claims, because when we went to check on Branson he was found dead. He had a heart attack last evening."

"What a pity." Draco replied, not breaking eye contact for a second with the wizard. Hermione glanced sidelong at Draco. He'd said those words to her before.

"Seems awfully convenient." The third auror, Kent said.

"As you can see, my injuries are real." Hermione stated. "I've given you all the facts. I visited Draco's father, we are courting and his mother wanted me to visit him. I was attacked upon leaving. I can't tell you anything else."

"And she needs to rest." Draco said in that quiet harsh way of his. "If you'd like to request another meeting you can do so in writing and we'll bring our solicitors with us."

"We'll be in touch, Miss Granger." Auror Kent said with a sneer towards Draco.

Once they left Hermione closed her eyes. Of course this wasn't going to be easy. Everything had to have a hundred obstacles. Draco pulled her into a hug, "It's going to be alright. I promise." He whispered.

"I'm tired." She sighed, unsure how to explain so many things on her mind. Should she just ask if he Obliviated her? Would that help her or hurt her? Would it change how she felt towards him? It certainly made her angry when she thought about it.

Healer Wells returned then with a quick knock on the door, along with a hard glance towards Draco before she began to speak.

"Here is the discharge paperwork and a summary of instructions for your care, this goes without saying, but you'd be surprised how many witches and wizards ignore or forget, but there is absolutely no apparating for at least a month. You've already scheduled your follow ups, so you're free to go."

"Thank you." Hermione said, already standing and grabbing her bag.

"Be careful Miss Granger." The healer gave her one last look and left.

Draco offered Hermione his hand. Together they found the closest floo together and went to the manor. Narcissa greeted her with a tight hug.

"Pansy and Theo set up your room and now are gone. I've told them to come back tomorrow afternoon after you've had time to rest. I'll be walking you to your room and there will be no arguing about it." Narcissa said. Hermione held back her tears and nodded.

The guest room was conveniently next to Draco's room, but twice the size with its own sitting area and dining table. "Tomorrow we can discuss everything." Narcissa said, reluctantly releasing Hermione in the center of the room. "Your evening potions are on the nightstand, Pilly will bring you dinner shortly." Narcissa smoothed her hand over Hermione's head, fidgeting as she stood. "Your bravery, my dear, is as scary as it is honorable. I am so very grateful your recovery has gone so smoothly and I'll be ensuring it continues to go that way. So this will be home for a while." Narcissa's eyes were glassy and Hermione felt her own threatening tears. Hermione hugged her instead of crying.

Narcissa left with a pointed look at Draco that Hermione didn't know how to interpret. Draco and Hermione looked at each other for a long moment. It felt like they were on opposite sides of a large cavern, with so much left unsaid between them. That conversation they needed to have would help build a bridge between them. but building a bridge to each other was either going to save them or kill them. It was such a long way to fall.

Pilly popped in, stopping their staring contest. Pilly hugged Hermione repeatedly in between setting up their dinner before leaving them alone again.

"Tell me about your shirt." Hermione said after another fifteen minutes of silence stretched between them, both of them pretending to be very interested in their bowls of soup.

This made Draco genuinely smile, it was small, but real. And that made Hermione relax. Whatever connection held between them was changing. Hemrione could feel it. Something was shifting between them and she didn't know what it meant and she was desperate for normal conversation.

"I've been waiting for you to bring it up." Draco leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowed on her, watching her closely.

"It's so brilliant." Hermione replied. "I'm not sure what kind of magic it is, but the execution is well done." She looked down at her almost empty bowl. "It protected me, you know. It stopped Branson from getting through to my skin. I think it's the reason why I'm still alive."

Saying the words aloud made everything so much more real. The heaviness wasn't exactly where she wanted this conversation to go.

"The only thing that saved you was yourself, Hermione." Draco said, each word spoken seriously, with an edge of sadness she wished she could take away from him. He undoubtedly blamed himself for Azkaban.

"How did you make it?" Hermione ignored his comment.

"I used your books on magical theory, I think your third book is the one that outlines the practical uses of shields that could be implemented into clothing." He said quietly. "I found a talented seamstress in France and worked with her to create it." He didn't quite meet her eye and she wondered if he was upset she took the shirt.

"I can give it back to you, if you miss it that much." She said playfully, grabbing her cup of water. "Although I still don't understand the glowing monogram."

Draco met her gaze then, "I charmed it to glow if you ever put it on and no I don't want it back. It's yours."

"Oh." Hermione didn't expect that response. Another tense silence began.

"I'll let you rest." Draco said, finally breaking their silence, standing from his chair.

"Don't." Hermione said quickly. "Will-will you stay with me?"

"Alright." He whispered. He was looking at her if she were about break in half right before his eyes. They stood there awkwardly again, neither of them sure what to do. Hermione moved first, hugging him around his waist, resting her head on his chest.

He held her for a long time before they separated and changed their clothes for bed.

The silence felt strange and heavy, urging her to break it as they climbed into bed. Instantly they reached for one another like two magnets finally being able to come together.

"Hermione." Draco said, a strained edge in his tone.

"Not tonight." She whispered. Hermione fell asleep almost instantly as Draco rubbed her head, but didn't miss him murmuring against her temple, "I love you." But it felt less like a declaration of love and more like an apology.

Hermione woke up alone sometime in the late afternoon. She hadn't meant to sleep that late, but her body must have needed it. The room was charmed to remain dark and quiet and she waited for another twenty minutes in bed before leaving the room. There was a lot on her mind to say the least. First and foremost was the information about Azkaban. She needed help to move forward with the next steps. Second there was the unspoken words between her and Draco. It was clear both of them cared deeply about each other, but would they survive the truths if spoken out loud? Thirdly, there was the danger she was in. Fourth, there was the fact she'd been Obliviated multiple times. All of this seemed to be intertwined somehow. Her mind kept these things separated for so long that now she wondered if that had been due to

the obliviation not allowing her to notice the connections. All of it was connected. She was at the center of it somehow and now she'd drag her friends into the tangled web as well.

Narcissa was waiting for her when she emerged from the room. Draco came out from the study across the hall. As if the room had been spelled to tell them when she exited. Narcissa silently walked Hermione into the sitting room, not letting go of her the entire time.

Hermione glanced behind her shoulder at Draco who gave her a small smile, but it didn't meet his eyes. It was coming. Hermione could feel something between them shifting. A lecture, an argument, a confession, or something else entirely. Perhaps this was where he broke up with her. This was his time to exit the shitshow of her life. Hermione couldn't blame him, she was too much for anyone. Too much for her mother, too much for Ron.

They arrived in the sitting room and were greeted by a chorus of cheers from Theo, Harry, and Pansy. Narcissa sat Hermione in a large wingback chair that she suspected the matriarch added an extra cushioning charm to. Hermione sank into the plush seat with a grateful sigh.

"How are you feeling?" Theo sat next to her on a chair similar to hers.

"Honestly, not too bad. I feel good. I feel ready to work." Theo rolled his eyes dramatically and Pansy stood beside him, tapping a foot. Oh yes, a lecture was coming, perhaps from all of them at once. Harry remained quiet on the couch across from her, glancing briefly at Draco who sat beside him. Harry wouldn't be lecturing her, but she hoped he'd defend her.

Narcissa sat and another silence snaked through the room. All eyes were on Hermione, all except Draco who hung his head, wringing his fingers together. No one wanted to be the first to speak, so Hermione would do it.

"Well, I'm just going to get this over with." Hermione said, sitting up straighter. "Pansy, why do you love me?" Pansy's mouth opened and then closed, brows knitting together in confusion and offense. Hermione didn't wait for an answer. "Why do you love me Theo?" Hermione asked impatiently. Theo was a little more prepared than Pansy.

"You're brilliant, you're kind, you're funny, you're—"

"I don't regret what I did." Hermione stated with as much force as possible. "You all claim to love me in some way or another and yet I know that look on Pansy's face means there is some kind of lecture coming. I don't want to be told I was wreckless or foolish. I am Hermione Granger. I am a war hermione. I run into danger. None of you look at Harry and tell him being an auror is stupid."

"Actually, I've said it multiple times." Pansy folded her arms across her chest.

"Okay, well perhaps that's true, but the point is that you expect Harry Potter to be brave because that's who he is. He is the chosen one and while I may just be the nerdy sidekick, I care deeply about what happens around me. I care about what is going on in our government. When I happened to come across a corrupt piece of our government I didn't think twice about whether or not it was any of my business. Nor did I disregard the risks of it. I understood the risks of entering the prison. I currently understand that there are people hunting me for sport or for spite or for both. I understand my life is still at risk and I accept all of those risks. I

want your help. I really do. But before I can ask for it, before I can tell you more information you have to know that I understand the risks of being—”

“A goody two shoes?” Theo replied. Hermione smiled smugly.

“Well yes.” She grinned. “If you can’t love all parts of me. The annoyingly risky parts and the parts you tolerate more, then this visit will be cut short. I need you all to know, I won’t let your Slytherin nature stop me from being who I am. We all lived through a horrific war and I don’t expect anyone to put themselves in danger, but I will continue to do what I feel is right. And if you don’t like it, that’s fine, but I don’t care. I will continue to find problems and fix them, the best way I can. I won’t allow anyone to make me smaller than what I am.” She glanced around the room. Draco still held his head down, his fingers folded together in a tight clasp, almost as if he were praying. Perhaps he was. Hermione knew he understood the words were for him as much as the others, maybe even more for him than anyone else.

“Draco and I have been hunting death eaters.” Harry blurted, causing Draco to jerk his head up. “I know what you’re saying, Hermione. I want to help.”

The rest of the room stared, expectantly at Harry.

“Oh, right.” Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “Well a two years ago Draco approached me for some help following a lead on a rogue death eater. He was able to bring him in and we sent him to Azkaban. But he got out on some bizarre technicality only a month later. The man kept spouting nonsense about Voldemort’s return and well I was getting so sick of hearing about Voldemort that I called Draco to vent about it. It was a strange conversation where I kept saying I wished there was more we could do, until Draco hypothetically said, ‘what if there was more?’”

Draco remained silent as Harry glanced nervously at him, “Then we kind of became friends.”

“You bonded over killing death eaters?” Theo asked, his eyebrows up to his hairline, grimacing. “How cute.”

“We don’t always kill them.” Harry explained, looking nervously at Hermione. “Sometimes we just follow them and learn more about where they are, what they’re up to. We created a database of the known whereabouts of any Voldemort supporters, but in January of this year they changed their habits entirely.”

“Sorry I’m late.” Cormac McLaggen said from the doorway of the sitting room. Draco stood immediately, charging towards the man. He was so fast Hermione wondered if he apparated across the room. Everyone shot up from their seats as Draco slammed his fist into Cormac’s face.

“Draco!” Hermione yelled.

Draco was already on his way back to the sitting area. “Don’t worry.” He said, shaking his hand. “I was the one who invited him. That was just the price of admission.”

Cormac waved his wand at his face, stopping the bleeding. “Worth it!” Cormac grinned with bloody teeth.

“What was that for specifically?” Pansy asked, her face amused.

Cormac sat down and winked at Hermione.

“Do that again and I’ll punch you again twice as hard.” Draco warned.

Cormac chuckled, “Fine I’ll start winking at you instead.” He looked around the room nodding to the others. “Where’s Zabini?”

“He went to Azkaban.” Narcissa said. Hermione let out a small gasp.

“We wanted to make sure we got all the details from witnesses.” Harry explained. “Can’t rely on too many in the DMLE.”

“I don’t care who starts talking, but you two need to start explaining things.” Pansy swung her head between Cormac and Hermione.

“Well, Granger, do you want to start? Or shall I?” Cormac leaned back in his chair.

Hermione looked around the room, “You’re all certain you want to be part of this?”

“Gorgeous, you could have asked us anytime for help and we would have said yes. While I concede we may be trying to tone down your brave little heart at times and certainly I’m not the first to volunteer for such dangerous things, I love you and I love your bravery.” Theo smiled. “Plus I am dying for the details.”

“Alright.” Hermione felt a mix of so many emotions stir inside her she didn’t know where to begin. “The timeline is a little blurry for me, but-” She stopped mid sentence. “The timeline is blurry.” She repeated. “Oh my gods.” She breathed harshly and her friends shifted in their seats.

“What is it?” Pansy asked, concerned, etching her face. “Is this too much for you? Do you need to lie down?”

“No. No.” Hermione shook her head. “I’ll explain later.” Draco met her gaze, his eyes full of sad worry. “McLaggen you should start. I think that’s better.” Hermione furrowed her brow trying to figure out what exactly felt blurry to her about the timelines of her study on Azkaban. What was that pin prick inside her brain? Where was it located?

“Well The greengrass family is trash.” McLaggen frowned. “My grandmother owned a small shop in diagon alley. Herbal treatments, ready made potions, magically infused soaps, things like that. The shop has been in our family for a hundred years. It’s not a crazy money making machine, but the location is great. My grandmother became ill last year and my mother took over the shop. The place was disorganized because my grandma had resisted most technology for the shop. When my mother went to file the yearly business license they informed her they no longer owned the building. Apparently while my grandmother was at St. Mungo’s getting treatments last christmas, the Greengrass family purchased the property under a stupid and

rarely enforced law. Gran hadn't filed the right tax documents and all notices mysteriously were returned to the ministry. My mother applied for extensions, but by the time they had it sorted out, none of the ministry staff could do much. A hundred years of our family's legacy was flushed down the toilet."

"I need McLaggen's signature on some paperwork for an Azkaban trip I took at the beginning of the year." Hermione added absentmindedly. "And we began talking about some of the failings of the ministry. He shared his story with me and I didn't think much of it until I noticed how often the Greengrass family had come up in some of the Azkaban conversations I was having." Hermione said, shifting in her seat. "I then began hearing whispers of The Brotherhood. Ron became more mysterious about his work dealings." She said things slowly, trying to force herself to find details she didn't have. "I began researching Azkaban's history, its practices, everything I could get my hands on."

"That's when I started trying to get closer to Ron again." Harry added. "Draco and I had started following death eaters who had suddenly stopped preaching about blood supremacy and began spouting things online about legacy and the promise of the future they were building. We started watching and tracking online movements. Ron was immediately suspicious of me when I tried to rekindle our friendship."

"He was also suspicious of anything I asked." Hermione said, "That's why I came to the conclusion I needed to infiltrate The Brotherhood."

"We've tried." Draco said, with a sigh. "We still don't know how they accept new members. We've tried bribing them. Donating money to the organization. We even tried sneaking in. Nothing works."

"Oh." Hermione said, smiling to herself "Well I already did it."

"You did what?" Harry said, his brows knitting together.

"I infiltrated The Brotherhood. Well Cormac and I did." Hermione stated. "What?" She said at Harry and Draco's bewildered expression. "It wasn't that hard." She shrugged.

"It was for us." Harry snapped. "Holy shit." He ran a hand through his hair. "I wish you would have told us a lot sooner."

"Hmm. I could say the same thing about you." Hermione smiled flatly.

"How did you do it?" Draco's eyes were full of curiosity and awe. The kind of look he gave her when she spoke about her books and her work.

"The way inside The Brotherhood is through the oldest form of currency." Hermione looked at Narcissa. The matriarch smiled, "Ah. I see."

"I don't!" Theo said. "I want to know."

"Gossip!" Pansy cackled. "What the actual hell!"

"Not just any gossip." Hermione said, "But secrets."

“So do you think Ron is responsible for all of this?” Pansy asked. “I should have knocked him out with a stunner spell when he came to the hospital.”

“I don’t know how or where Ron fits into the whole thing. He’s involved that’s for sure, but I can’t help but wonder if- well if-”

“He’s too stupid to coordinate all of it?” Harry finished.

“Precisely.”

“Was he not suspicious of McLaggen?” Draco asked.

McLaggen replied, “Oh he was, but I played it off well. Played into the suspicion. I had to bad mouth my gran a few times, but it’ll be worth it. I’ve been able to share certain things that have helped me advance into his good graces. It’s clear he’s well respected within the organization, but the Brotherhood, Weasley, and Azkaban are tied together in nasty financial channels. They’re complicated.” McLaggen threw a large stack of files on the table.

“These were the files I was able to replicate from Azkaban.”

“So that’s why you went?” Harry said. “To get files?”

“Yes and to talk to Lucius.” Hermione watched as Draco tensed and before he could ask Hermione answered what she assumed to be his number one question. “He was the only one who agreed to be interviewed for my book.” Draco furrowed his brow. “And I agreed to help him create a plan to get out of Azkaban.”

“You did what?” Pansy snapped.

“My father is not getting out of Azkaban.” Draco shook his head. “No committee will agree to see him out.”

“There are measurable ways to demonstrate his changed behavior. The first one being his attitude towards muggles. Having regular visitations with a muggle born war heroine depicts that. As well as his goal to become a primary teacher, a muggle primary teacher.” Hermione stated.

“My father? A primary teacher? That’s a cruel punishment for children” Draco said, exasperated. “He’d terrify them.”

“Probably. We haven’t quite worked out the student teaching portion, but he’s progressing well in his online classes.” Hermione shrugged. “And in turn he shared how the guards treat them, how they’re shaken down for secrets, beat up or rewarded for sharing gossip from their families. My theory is that the guards are either selling the secrets or gaining access into The Brotherhood with them. Anthony Goldstein is involved as well. The problem is we have a lot of circumstantial evidence, nothing enough to actually bring to a court. Not when we don’t know how far The brotherhood’s reach is. And now if they’re going to try to blame me for causing havoc in the prison it might be dismissed entirely. If we let this get out that we have this much knowledge on what they’re doing. Witnesses will die and evidence will disappear.

“So that’s why I initially called the meeting to see what we can all pull together.” Hermione nodded, a weight lifting off her chest.

“I have an update to share as well.” Draco’s eyes changed again, occluding all but the sliver of sadness he couldn’t hide from her. “We may have a solution to all of your safety issues, Hermione.” He didn’t meet her eyes when he spoke and she stiffened her spine waiting for his words to hurt. Draco relayed his experience with the imposter leaving all of them silent for several minutes before they all burst out in response simultaneously.

“That’s a load of fucking shit.” McLaggen said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Harry stammered, clearly offended at his decision to withhold the information.

“I needed to wait until Hermione was awake. She had to be part of the decision.” Draco said sullenly. Hermione couldn’t stop looking at Draco. Something in her mind pulled taut. That changing sensation she kept feeling earlier was twisting inside her, spiraling through her.

“You can’t believe that they’d actually leave her alone?” Pansy snapped. “How would breaking up with her help with anything?”

“Do you really believe this ugly person is trustworthy? There are other ways to protect your identity, Draco.” Theo stood as he spoke, beginning to pace. Each of all kept listing the reasons why the imposter shouldn’t be treated like an actual option and what other routes they could take.

Hermione remained silent, watching Draco as he stared at the floor. Something- something- wasn’t making sense. Something tickled her brain-something was different. Something inside her felt different, not bad, but definitely something odd, like a new sort of sensation, familiar and yet foreign. She honed in on the feeling as she watched Draco wring his hands together. Hermione searched for what felt like- it felt like Draco... Her eyes narrowed on him, pulling on that feeling, it practically felt tangible inside her mind. What was this.... *Draco. Draco.* It undoubtedly felt like him. She tugged on the sensation again, honing in on her mind’s library and in her mind she found a small rope, like a woven cord for opening drapes. It laid on the floor. She picked it up and felt her skin prickle, like touching static electricity.

“*Draco.*” The sound echoed in her mind and his head snapped up, his eyes wide with shock and confusion.

They stared at one another while their friends continued to list out new ideas for them to pursue, but Hermione wasn’t listening. Her heart beat faster trying to understand what was happening.

“*Can-can-you hear me?*” She said inside her mind, inhaling sharply. Draco’s mouth dropped open and then closed.

“*I can.*” Hermione’s body froze. His voice in her mind was like melted honey. It was rich and warm, yet almost overpowering.

"How is this possible?" She looked at the rope in her hand, silver and gold strands woven together. "This shouldn't be possible. Telepathy is incredibly rare. It's only been documented four or five times. Only twice between couples and those centered around legilimency and that would be impossible because you've never-" Hermione's eyes widened with understanding. *"You- you- you- went inside my mind."* Draco's jaw tightened. *"You left an open channel in my mind Draco. In my mind!"* Hermione's breathing began to speed up. *"This is- This is- oh my gods. I can't- How did you- I don't know how this is working, this is very- oh my gods."* She could hardly speak. Her mind raced with trying to put how she felt into words.

"Are you upset? I honestly can't tell." Draco spoke into her mind and she threw her hands up, both in her mind and in real life. *"I don't know."* Hermione cried. *"Part of me wants us to go down to St. Mungo's immediately to get us in a study. We need to figure out what kind of magic created a mental channel like this. You must have left a piece of your magic behind, like an anchor of some kind that linked our minds together. It also means our magic is incredibly compatible. Which contributes to another growing theory I have, but at the same time I want to strangle you because this is my mind Draco. My mind!"* Hemrione stood from her chair abruptly and paced silently in the sitting room. The room went quiet as she moved, muttering to herself.

"Is she alright?" McLaggen asked.

Draco stood, his own breathing becoming short huffs.

"I didn't do it on purpose. The anchor or whatever it is that left. I didn't know that I could do that. I swear to you I was perfect in every step I took. I needed to know, Hermione. I needed to know what happened in Azkaban and who hurt you."

"Will you be able to stop?" Hermione turned to him. *"Now that you have seen my memories, will this escalate your obsession? Will you be able to not know every detail of my experiences?"*

Draco's mouth tightened and he scrubbed a hand over his face.

"What is going on?" Theo asked slowly as everyone watched their silent conversation.

"I-I- I want to be someone you trust Hermione and I'm sorry, but I don't regret it. Branson needed to be dealt with."

"Tell me about the letter Draco." Hermione stated out loud and the room hung heavy with anticipation, like flinging a dagger into the room, waiting for it to land.

"Fine. let's talk about the letter." Draco threw his hands up. "What's there to say? I violated your privacy. I know. I hoped you wouldn't care or would be at least regretful."

"What?" Hermione hissed. "Me? Regretful? You're so full of yourself."

"Yes. I thanked you for your testimony and your letter-"

“My letter?” Hermione snapped. “Your letter is what we need to discuss!”

“Yes, that’s what I’m talking about. The letter I wrote is your letter and the letter you wrote is my letter.” Draco looked perturbed as if she was stupid. All his young, angst-filled haughtiness coming out to play.

“I can’t tell if they’re going to kiss or if Hermione is going to take a swing at him.” McLaggen said.

“No, Draco. My letter is my letter and your letter is your letter and your letter was extremely hurtful.”

“I’m aware of how you feel about my letters!” Draco snapped. “And I ignored your warning. So what? Do you honestly regret it?” He looked sad now, frustrated, but sad.

Hermione took a deep breath, “My warning was in jest, yours was not.”

“I didn’t warn you about anything. What are you talking about?”

“What are either of you talking about?” Harry said, shaking his head.

“His letter!” Hermione yelled at the same Draco yelled, “Her letter!”

They stared at each other, both of their chins jutted out.

“Clearly you can’t admit you’re sorry, since apparently you’re never sorry about anything.” Hermione said.

“Why do I need to be fucking sorry?” Draco pulled at his hair.

“Language Draco!” Narcissa snapped. “That’s no way to speak to the woman you’re courting.”

Draco looked at the ceiling and Hermione could feel her throat tighten, but she couldn’t back down. She began reciting the letter by memory.

“Dear Hermione, Of course I’m ignoring your letters. Did you think that just because I had the decency to write a thank you note for your testimony that I suddenly became a mudblood lover? The words felt like hot ash on her tongue. Draco’s whole body tensed. “I could hardly touch the parchment because I didn’t want your mudblood filth sliming my skin up. I don’t want to read your fucking books. I don’t want to see your ugly face. I don’t want to ever speak to you again.”

“Hermione.” Draco said, moving towards her. Hermione held up a hand. He would hear the whole letter in front of everyone. “You disgust me. Do not write to me. I never want to be contacted by you again. Do not come visit me. I never want to be seen with you in public. Could you imagine the things the world would say about me? I would never slum it with such trash like you, not even in a hellhole like Askaban. You must be more stupid than I thought, so let me spell it out for you loud and clear: I hate muggles and more than anything else I

hate you. I hate you. I hate you. Do you get it now? With the utmost sincerity, Draco Malfoy." She exhaled sharply, "Ring any bells?"

"Draco." Narcissa was standing now, her voice a cold warning.

Draco apparated out of the room. Hermione's tears fell faster down her cheeks as Theo pulled her into a hug. "It's alright." He squeezed her.

Draco reappeared in the sitting room again closer to Hermione this time. His voice was hollow as he spoke. "Please believe me when I tell you I didn't write that." His hands shook as he lifted several pieces of worn parchment. "I wrote you thank you for your testimony, did you receive that letter?"

Hermione nodded, sniffling. "I wrote you back. Several times."

Draco shook his head. "I didn't receive any of them Hermione."

Her brows knit together, "Until you wrote me that letter."

"No, until you wrote me a letter." Draco lifted a piece of parchment. "Dear Draco, you don't deserve my attention or response, but perhaps a person as vile as you doesn't understand. If I saw you in a hundred years from now it would be too soon. I never want to see your face or hear your name again. Leave me alone. Don't write to me. Don't speak to me. Don't let me see you ever again. Sincerely Hermione granger." He handed her the letter and Hermione read over the words. Twice. Three times. Four times.

"I never- I never-" Hermione couldn't speak again. "I didn't write this." Hermione was crying more for a different type of sadness.

"The letter you got from me...I wrote something kind of similar to my father." Draco said, his eyes locked on hers. "I think someone found it and transfigured it." Draco took a tentative step towards Hermione. "Hermione."

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Draco's arms wrapped around her.

"All this time?" Hermione said into him in his mind. "We could have been writing to each other, speaking to each other. We could have- " She cried harder with the realization Draco never wrote her the letter that haunted her for so long. What could have been between them? What could have happened sooner?

"I wrote to you multiple times. I'm guessing you didn't get them either."

"No." Hermione shook her head. Maybe speaking mind to mind was going to be her favorite thing. It was incredibly convenient.

"I love you." He said and it made her cry harder. "I would never write that to you. I love you so much darling."

Hermione was tempted to say it back to him. It was on the tip of her tongue, begging to be released when Blaise stormed through the room.

“Draco.” Blaise snapped. “We have a problem.”

Draco was immediately moving towards Blaise, pressing Hermione behind him and grabbing his wand in the process. “What? What is it?”

Before Draco could react, Blaise flicked his wand and Draco’s wand went flying out of his hand towards Narcissa. Narcissa caught it with confusion, tentatively stepping towards the two men. Blaise cast an advanced sticking charm on Draco’s legs. “This.” Blaise held up four polaroid pictures, like holding out a hand of cards.

“Hermione, I can explain!” Draco tried turning to her, arching his back to twist towards her.

“You fucking bastard!” Pansy launched herself at Draco, punching him in the jaw. Theo grabbed Pansy pulling her off Draco as she scratched and kicked him. Harry approached slowly, waving his wand. Draco was slammed down on a chair and spun around, wrapped in tight bindings.

Hermione’s jaw was locked in place, watching the chaos unfold with a strange numbness spreading inside her as she realized what this meant.

“Please let me explain.” Draco said into her mind. She didn’t bother responding. She just stared at the four polaroids Blaise still held in his. Four pictures of Draco and Hermione. Four pictures without the blurry charm. Four original photos.

“I found these with his magical signature all over it.” Blaise stared at Draco, an anger in Blaise’s eyes that Hermione had never seen before. “You know Draco, I hung out with Hermione a lot the last few weeks. And I’ve read the books on her shelf. Love by the Lake has a character that goes by the name of Bennet Salvatore. And you know what? I realized I’d heard that name before.” Blaise inhaled sharply, “It was on the list of neighbors in Hermione’s neighborhood. I thought that was quite odd, so I began checking around the house. Imagine my surprise when I find your things inside the flat and these pictures, like trophies on a shelf. So tell us Draco, did you send Hermione those pictures?”

Draco’s eyes were not occluded, which made Hermione angry. Now he wanted to show his emotions? His glassy eyes only looked at her when he said, “Yes, I sent them.”

She didn’t stop Harry when he pulled out a vial of clear liquid. “Open up, Malfoy.”

“He’s an occlumens, Mister Potter.” Narcissa said coldly as she approached her son. “You’ll need to give him at least ten drops of veritas serum for it work sufficiently.”

The Lost Letters

Granger,

Thank you for your testimony. I read it often to remind myself of the future I could have some day. I don't deserve your kindness, but I am deeply grateful nonetheless. Thank you.

-DM

Malfoy,

I am quite surprised to hear from you. And you're welcome for the testimony. Although if you're reading my it that much you should know that I believe you deserved my kindness. I was only telling the truth.

I know how cruel Azkaban can be, even without the dementors. How do you keep yourself busy everyday? What are you allowed to do?

-HG

Malfoy,

I'm not sure if you received my last letter it was over three months ago, but if the prison is not treating you well, please let me know. I can try to do something. It was surprising to receive your letter, but I think it was a pleasant one.

-HG

P.S Would you be interested in reading a potions book? I'm currently putting final touches on my first book on poisonous potions. As my only true competition in potions class I thought you might enjoy it. I will warn you though, if you make fun of it, I will hex you for it. I'm happy to send you an early copy. You can add it to your collection of first editions in the Malfoy manor's library. I'm certain one day my books will be just as valuable.

Malfoy,

I still haven't heard a reply in from you and I'm sorry if I'm bothering you. I'm certain you're busy just surviving in that wretched place. I really hope they're not blocking your

mail. I've heard rumors of how badly they're treating prisoners. I'm done with my book, I was actually thinking of delivering it to you in person. That way I can at least confirm you're ignoring my letters yourself and it's not the prison. What do you think? Care for a visit?

-HG

Granger,

It's been a few months since I wrote you. I was isolated for awhile. Even in Azkaban they love to punish death eaters. My mother sent me your new book. Currently reading through the fourth section, but it's already brilliant. Thought you should know, especially since this is coming from the only person who could best you at potions.

-DM

Granger,

I finished your book a few weeks ago and can't stop thinking about it. I've reread it twice. Could I have a signed copy of it? I'm willing to pay, of course. This book will become a huge innovation in the way potion masters teach their students. It's going to be right up there with Borage. I have his first edition, well my family does. The Malfoy library is filled with rare books I could brag about. If you're ever interested in hearing about rare books. I'm happy to brag. Anyway, I just wanted to say congratulations. Your book is well done and I am looking forward to your next one.

-DM

Granger,

My mother mentioned you two worked a charity event together last month. She had nothing but good things to say about you. Impressing my mother isn't easy. Tell me, how did you survive Narcissa Malfoy's party planning moods?

In other unrelated news, I am finally allowed to have visitors, they blocked me from them for a while. My mother is coming to visit soon. But anyone can visit. It doesn't have to be family. Maybe you could come and sign my book? I know its a lot to ask. I won't lie, Azkaban is as dreadful as it sounds. Absolutely horrid. It's a terrible and sad place. You have

every reason to not come. You really shouldn't come. But if you ever wanted to risk it, I wouldn't mind a visitor.

-DM

Chapter 31

Three drops of veritas serum were enough for an average wizard to spill their guts. A doubled dose would undoubtedly loosen anyone's tongue of remaining secrets tucked away by an extreme strength of will. Nine to ten drops were necessary for a trained occlumens. Anymore than that you could risk permanent damage to someone's ability to lie. And that was a very tempting option for Hermione. Taking away the ability to lie from Draco Malfoy would be a well deserved punishment. Had he played her for a fool this entire time? Was he simply tricking her? Playing the ultimate joke on her? How could he love someone like her anyway? Maybe he was lying about the letter. Maybe he did hate her.

Draco's jaw was tight as he looked at Hermione, his eyes filled with the apology he kept repeating inside her mind. "*I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*" Speaking mind to mind was becoming irritating. It was just another way for him to intrude on her space. And why was the man she loved more than anything in the world such a fucking liar? It was overwhelming. The love for him and the distrust of him battled for dominance inside her, making her numb more than anything else. So she stayed quiet. Watching and observing and allowing the reality to sink into her. Draco sent the pictures. Blaise had handed her the photos as Harry gave Draco the truth serum.

Draco remained still even after the drops were poured on his tongue. He didn't fight it, whether it was the fact his mother was witnessing it or he wanted to tell the truth, Hermione wasn't sure. She hoped it was because of the latter, but that didn't seem quite right. Draco told the truth as far as he could control the consequences, that was clear to her now. He'd given her bit-sized truths. Enough to keep her calm, but never enough to be fully truthful with her. "*I'm sorry, Darling. I'm so sorry.*" His voice echoed in her mind.

She needed a way to turn him off or at least the volume down. She walked around inside her mind, thinking of a way to store the link between them. She conjured a box. Then changed her mind and conjured a small safe. Similar to the other Draco vault in her mind, but she didn't store it where she stored the other one. She left it on the first level for easy access. She placed the rope inside the safe and spun the lock. And as if a wall had slammed between them his voice disappeared. Hmm. It felt odd. It wasn't his voice that was gone, but that presence in her mind disappeared too.

Draco's face twisted in front of her. He must have felt the effects as well. Good. He didn't deserve access to her mind right now.

"You've been stalking hermione." Harry stated, his arms folded across his chest.

Draco's jaw tightened painfully. He was fighting it. Harry wasn't stupid. He said it as a statement and not as a question on purpose, testing the strength of the serum and Draco's ability to withhold information. Hermione also suspected Harry was doing it for Draco's benefit, to help him gauge the strength of the serum. Did Harry really feel sorry for Draco? Hermione rolled her eyes.

“That wasn’t a question, Potter.” Zabini snapped. Blaise shifted his feet. “Why are these pictures in your house?”

“They belong to me.” Draco said, straining with each word that was forced from his lips. Still carefully crafted to give the least amount of information.

“Why did you send them to her? Why did you threaten to share them?” Pansy asked, Theo still restrained her. When he let go of her the first time Pansy swung again at Draco, punching him in the nose this time. Nobody bothered to heal him.

“I didn’t send the threat.” Draco only looked at Hermione. “I told you in our first meeting, that I didn’t threaten you.”

“Oh so you just forgot to mention you sent her an exploding box of pictures.” Pansy tried to break free of Theo’s grip again.

“I’m going to restrain you in a chair too, Parkinson.” Harry snapped. “Stop trying to hurt him.”

“You weren’t there!” Pansy shouted. “It exploded in Hermione’s hands. It was like a firework went off in her flat. We were terrified. I thought Hermione was going to die. She thought I was going to die. Then there was a letter that threatened to expose those images. It was horrible!” Pansy ducked and sprang free from Theo’s arms, but before she could reach Draco, Harry made good on his threat and Pansy dropped into one of the wingback chairs, restrained like a toddler in a car seat.

“What the fuck!” Pansy squirmed. “What is this contraption?”

“Why did you send the photos, Malfoy?” Harry asked.

“Because I missed her!” Draco said through gritted teeth.

“Why didn’t you just say hello like a normal person?” Blaise shook his head, exasperated at Draco’s answer.

“I am not a normal person. I’m a coward.” Draco admitted, sweat trickling down his forehead.

“So you thought sending explicit pictures of your one night stand would win her back?” Theo frowned. “Are you really that dumb?”

“I was drunk.” Draco’s face lifted to the ceiling. He hated this. He hated not being able to control the story he told. Good. Hermione thought. He should hate this. She looked at the photos in her hand, her stomach sinking. She had run away from him in Paris and he still missed her four months later. She flipped through the photos. Pausing on one that made her heart skip.

“And? Tell us more about the night you sent them. Don’t skimp on the details.” Theo added

"I saw her on a date." Draco said, the words coming out rushed. "I saw her on a date and I was jealous and angry and I went home."

"To the flat right across the fucking street from her house!" Blaise stated.

"I went home and got drunk." Draco's words were coming out faster than he could control. "I listened to sad muggle music. I drank a lot of firewhiskey and looked at the security footage I had of our time together in paris. I-I-" Draco resisted the words until they broke through his mouth again, like a damn breaking and a rush of water flooding an unsuspecting town, Draco's eyes were wild with terror. It was the vulnerability in them that made Hermione's stomach twist torn between her own fear and her feelings for him. "I had reasoned that if I sent her the images she might remember.... remember how good we were together. So I sent them to her in the muggle mail."

"Why did you make it explode?" Theo furrowed his brow.

"I don't remember doing that. I don't think I did. I was drunk and magic can act strange performed under alcohol, but I didn't want to scare her." Draco said, "I only sent four pictures and a separate letter."

"So you did threaten her!" Blaise said.

"No. I sent a different letter." Draco closed his eyes, exhaling sharply.

Blaise and Hermione looked at each other both having the same realization together.

"I fucking knew that handwriting looked familiar." Blaise shook his head. "The one that repeatedly said I miss you? That's the letter you sent?"

"Yes." Draco looked at the ceiling now.

"Why?" Pansy snapped from her carseat. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I'm in love with her you idiot!" Draco raised his voice for the first time. Most likely because of the potion's effort to force the truths out of him that he was still resisting. He was still being careful with his words though. Even when the potion overpowered him he was still so specific with how he spoke. He was so powerful. His magic was incredible. Incredible enough to stalk her. Incredible enough to oblige her. Incredible enough to harm her if he wanted to.

The room had gone quiet with his confession. Harry looked at Blaise for direction. Blaise looked confused and frowned at the admission. Pansy smirked, but still looked angry. Narcissa was quietly observing, tapping a finger against her arm that folded across her chest, her confliction apparent.

"So you love Hermione?" Theo asked, stepping forward.

"Yes." Draco replied, eyes still glued to the ceiling.

"How much do you love her?" Theo sang, enjoying the interrogation.

“A lot.” Draco gritted out.

“How much is a lot?” Theo grinned.

“You love her and you sent her those photos.” Harry stated, stopping Draco from answering Theo’s question. “Why didn’t you tell anyone you sent the photos?”

“Because clearly someone was tampering with our mail. I didn’t know if it was mine or hers, but someone saw the photos, added the explosion charm and sent the threat. Someone was threatening her and I wasn’t going to confess, when I could help fix the problem.” Draco said, he was calmer now, maybe it felt good to get this off his chest. “Can you take these restraints off me now?” Draco asked quietly, hanging his head towards the floor.

“How did you get polaroids of Paris?” Blaise asked.

Draco’s glare was one of utmost condescension, “I’m a fucking wizard. I have something called magic.”

“Do you have any intention to physically hurt Hermione?” Harry asked, beginning a series of rapid fire questions.

“No.”

“Are you the one sending explosions or amortentia soaked flowers?” Harry asked, hardly waiting for Draco’s no to be finished.

“No.” Draco said emphatically.

“Are you trying to kidnap her?” Harry

“No..not...exactly.” Draco’s jaw tightened and Hermione huffed. The first sound she’d made the entire time. Draco’s eyes immediately shifted to her. She could still feel him trying to mentally reach her, trying to find whatever channel she had found between them. He couldn’t exactly find it though. He was knocking on the door, jiggling the handle, but he was too stressed to focus enough to find it. Spreading his magic thinly to control the veritas serum plus traveling in their joined mental space must feel like a physical strain on his body. Draco was so powerful.

“Are you posing as the fake Draco?” Harry asked. Draco rolled his eyes.

“No. I don’t look that fucking ugly!” Draco said, then added quickly, “Right? Someone tell me I don’t look like him. Mother, get me a mirror. Does my smile look weird? Please confirm I don’t look like him!” Draco’s eyes widened at the confession. Clearly he hadn’t meant to share those thoughts.

“Am I your best friend?” Harry asked, quickly.

“Yes, obviously.” Draco said. “Fucking hell.” He groaned at the admission, possibly inciting more embarrassment than the last.

Blaise moved in front of Draco. "In fifth year, right before christmas we played wizard's chess and I asked if you were cheating, you said no. Did you cheat?"

"No. You were just that bad at chess!" Draco barked.

Blaise frowned, "Why do you live across the street from Hermione?"

"I lived there first." Draco replied more controlled than before.

Their friends looked at Hermione and then back at Draco.

"If Draco hadn't sent those pictures, Hermione would have never asked for help." Pansy said quietly, from her wingback carseat. "She would have ignored the threats. Who knows what would have happened if Blaise and Draco hadn't started increasing the security wards. She could have been hurt a long time ago. Or worse taken from us."

"And we know that it was a group of people after her because Draco tracked down the assailants." Harry added mulling it over. "Were you ever going to tell us?"

Draco sighed, "Eventually. Probably." The room was silent and Harry waved a wand over Draco and the restraints fell away.

"What about me Potter?" Pansy looked pointedly at him. Harry released Pansy with a shrug.

"Hermione." Draco stood slowly, his eyes pleading with her. "I- I- I was jealous and angry. I don't know what I was thinking that night, but I just felt stuck and I missed you. Please forgive me."

She wanted to forgive him. She really did. But the photo in her hand, the one that told her a truth she didn't want to accept, was a photo that wasn't from Paris at all. To an onlooker it might seem like they're all the same, but Hermione remembered every part of Paris. The fourth photo, an up close picture of them kissing, was not from Paris. Hermione didn't know why it took her so long to realize it. The image was the one she looked at regularly, using it as a bookmark, charmed for others to ignore because of its intense nature, but she'd been using the evidence of his obliviation daily. It was right in front of her, this entire time. Hermione didn't know what to do or what to think. Her heart pounded against her chest as she slid open the safe's door. Feeling his immediate presence in her mind was like a tight embrace. Draco didn't move, but his eyes relaxed slightly, seeing the invitation as a sign of her forgiveness.

"They scanned my brain at the hospital." She said into his mind. His confusion was only momentary. *"How many times have you Obliviated me, Draco?"* His face paled, his jaw set hard *"How many times?"* Hermione repeated, tears falling down her cheek.

"Do they know how to speak with their eyes?" Cormac said. Hermione had forgotten he was still there. Apparently he knew when to sit down and stay quiet.

"Just once." Draco said quietly. "And I was going-"

“Going to tell me?” Hermione said, laughing at the statement. *“Right. Just like you were probably going to tell me about the pictures. Or stalking me. Or any of the things that are absolutely insane.”*

“Hermione.” Draco said, more forcefully this time. *“I can feel the veritas serum still thrumming inside my veins. I am telling the truth. I wanted to tell you. I was going to tell you. I just hoped... I hoped you would remember.”*

“Why haven’t you given me the memories back?”

“I haven’t trusted myself to perform the spell.” Draco said. *“It’s complex and I couldn’t just randomly insert missing memories without explanation. You wouldn’t trust me.”*

“I still don’t.” Hermione swiped angrily at her tears. *“I have no reason to trust you.”*

“Wait, how many times have you been obliviated Hermione?” Draco took a step forward.

Hermione flinched at the realization someone else had obliviated her. Draco must have had the same realization because he took another step towards her.

“Every action I’ve taken has been to show you how much you mean to me.” He sounded scared. *“You’re it for me Hermione. You’re everything to me. I don’t feel lost when I’m with you.”*

Hermione turned, abruptly. She needed to leave. She needed space. She couldn’t take any more secrets. This was all too much.

Hermione was lost in thought as she subconsciously began thinking of her destination. Her determination instantly fueled by the anger, both at herself and Draco, that spiraled through her. Her deliberation was sparking inside her, making her magic begin to rise alongside it, she was on the brink of apparating, milliseconds away from a conscious decision that would have instantly pulled through space, when Hermione was tackled to the ground.

Draco pulled her on top of him as they landed partially on the floor and on a chair. “Fucking hell.” Draco groaned. “That hurt.”

Hermione froze as icy shock pulsed through her in cold waves of realization. She was about to apparate. She was about to fucking apparate. Draco shifted, “Are you alright?” He brushed her hair out of her face. She nodded sitting up, gasping for air. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe.

Their friends rushed over.

“Draco how the fuck did you catch her in time?” Harry asked. Draco had saved her life again.

“Hermione, what were you thinking?” Theo shouted. “For the smartest person I know, you’re an idiot!”

Hermione was beginning to shake. "I don't know. I don't know." She almost physically hurt herself because she was so hellbent on emotionally protecting herself. The irony was not lost on her. In fact she was so angry at herself. What was she doing?

"Give her space." Pansy snapped. "This has been a lot to deal with."

"I don't want to interrupt." Blaise said, "But Weasley is currently at Hermione's front door. He's trying every spell possible to get in." Blaise looked at his phone and showed the small screen of Ron banging his fists on Hermione's door.

"I spelled it against him." Harry said. "He won't be able to get in." Hermione couldn't pay attention to what they were talking about. Draco had saved her life again. The opposite way this time. Apparating to him saved her the first time and now he stopped her from splotch herself. Or worse. She found his eyes, they were already on her. Waiting to see her reaction. Her mouth hung open, unsure what to say. Panic still bounced through her from her scalp to her toes. Like her blood had been electrocuted her whole body tingled.

"Perhaps we should take a break for a while and reconvene when Draco and Hermione have had time to discuss things." Narcissa spoke for the first time since approving the use of the truth serum. The group nodded towards each other and dispersed without saying anything else to them.

Hermione was still shaking, the reality that she could have harmed herself because she was upset with Draco, was terrifying. She could have splinched herself. She could have...

"I felt you." Draco said to her mind, pulling her on his lap. He had carried her to the couch without her realizing it. She was spiraling through so many feelings. *"I could almost hear your decision to apparate, but I felt it first, felt the stir of magic."* Hermione watched his throat bob. It scared him too. He probably wanted to tell her how reckless she was, but she would agree with him. That was wreckless. That was so stupid. She was so stupid.

"*You're not stupid.*" Draco said. "*You're scared.*"

"*Can you just read all my thoughts now?*" Hermione asked, leaning against his chest, her body began to relax.

"*I don't think so. Just the ones that are really loud.*"

They were quiet for a while and Hermione questioned her own judgment. Why was she running? What was she so afraid of? Did she believe him? She was so afraid of him leaving her but she was the only one that ever ran away. Would he always chase her? What did she really want? She wanted Draco. This entire time she's wanted him and still fought it because she didn't think it was wise to want him. She had him and she was still running away from him. She was judging herself for loving him. For wanting him. But why? If his answers were legitimate, then she could forgive him and make him grovel. She almost splinched herself because she couldn't accept that he loved her? What was she doing? She wanted him. She loved him. Still, she needed his honesty. She needed him to go first and share the details of everything between them, especially about the obligation. But the unsettling truth that she'd been wrestling with and judging herself and not wanting to accept, was that she just didn't

care. She didn't care that he sent the photos. it was overwhelming to realize, but she wasn't that upset. She wasn't even upset about the obliviation not in the way she thought she would be, because she ultimately did trust him. She trusted him more than anyone else in the world. Hermione now realized, she wanted him to trust her enough to tell her the truth. She didn't really care what the truth was, just that he felt safe enough to share.

"Edgar Allan Poe said, 'Tell me every terrible thing you ever did and let me love you anyway.' " Hermione said to his mind. " I know you've been waiting for me to be brave and share my own feelings first, but I can't. This is probably the most selfish thing I can say or do, and maybe this is where I actually feel justified about my own self preservation. So let me have my self preservation Draco. Let me hear every terrible thing and let me love you anyway." Hermione didn't look up at him.

"So you love me?" Draco replied.

Hermione smiled. " Tell me every terrible thing you've ever done." Hermione repeated, "And let me love you anyway."

"I'll tell you everything." Draco said, tightening his arms around her. "Where do you want me to start?"

Chapter 32

Hermione was quiet for a long time as sat curled up in Draco's lap. Where does he start? From the beginning she supposed. His arms hadn't budged, like bands of iron, they remained around her body holding her close. Her heart still beat rapidly even though she'd spent more than ten minutes sitting like this. Her body wasn't recovering quickly from the emotional whiplash of the last hour.

"I can't believe I almost apparated." She whispered.

"I warned you, didn't I?" He said into the top of her hair. "If you ran, I'd chase you."

Hermione's mouth twitched, "Are you mad at me?"

Draco was quiet for longer than Hermione thought was necessary to answer the question, which made her nervous when he finally did begin to speak. "Well...I...er..." He swallowed. "Shouldn't I be asking you that question?"

"I don't know." Then suddenly realizing they were no longer going to ignore their secrets and lies, she sat up straight and said, "'Take me to your flat.'"

Draco stilled, "Why?"

"Isn't that where this photo was taken?" Hermione said as the photo floated from the ground where it had fallen from Draco's tackle to in front of their faces.

"Do you remember?" Draco asked.

"No. I don't remember anything. Not even a whisper of a memory." Hermione said softly. "Is that why you wouldn't take me to your flat on your birthday? Because it would confirm that you were my neighbor?"

"Yes." Draco said. "Did you suspect I lived there even then?."

"Well, sort of... not really. I don't know." Hermione shrugged. "I couldn't assume anything. I had never seen you. I didn't have any real reason to believe it was you."

Draco chuckled. "When you moved in across the street from my flat I thought it was a lucky coincidence at first, but realized quickly it was too insane to be a coincidence."

"I'm not insane." Hemrione bristled.

"No you're not, darling." Draco kissed her temple, then with a sly smile asked, "How did you know where to find me?"

"Well I saw your letters to your father under the name Bennet Salvatore. I thought, what are the odds that a real person who has the same name as my book character is writing Lucius

Malfoy. The address on envelope made me curious so I looked it up after I broke up with Ron. My flat was available for rent when I walked around the neighborhood.”

“Did you try to get inside my house?”

“No. On the off chance there really was a person named Bennet Salvatore inside, I didn’t want to freak them out. And when I tried to knock on the door and introduce myself as your neighbor, the wards stopped me.” Hermione straightened. “You’re the one supposed to be telling me things, Draco.”

He smiled guiltily, then his eyes grew serious. “I don’t know if you actually want to know every terrible thing I’ve done.”

“Maybe not all at once.” Hermione replied. “But certainly you need to tell me what makes you think I can’t love you enough to choose you myself.” She turned fully to him. “You want to force me to love you Draco, because part of you doesn’t believe I can choose on my own. So tell me. Tell me the thing that you think would make me run away from you?”

Draco’s jaw tightened, then he opened his mouth to say something.

“Wait.” Hermione pressed a finger to his mouth. “Do you want an antidote for the veritas serum? I don’t want you to think you have to be on this serum for me to believe you.”

“It’s fine.” Draco murmured against her finger. “Let’s go to my flat.” He said, pressing a kiss to her finger.

A shiver went down her spine. So this was it. This was the moment where everything would change.

They floo’d to his flat. Hermione stood in Draco’s living room and it made her want to cry. It smelled like him. It looked like him. The spacious sitting room had large windows giving him the perfect view of her flat across the street. Hermione could easily envision Draco watching her from here. Then she giggled imagining him watch McLaggen walk up to her flat. Draco watched her as she looked around the space. He had a brown leather sofa, a few armchairs and a low lying table centered around the fireplace. Book shelves were lined with everything from the classics to modern romance, including all of her books, both muggle and magical. She brushed her fingers over the small decor items and trinkets on the shelves.

His house reminded her of a professor’s office. It was warm, comfortable, and academic in nature.

Hermione began to wander, walking down a hallway, finding his study. Several computer monitors sat on a desk. Another row of extensive bookshelves lined the study, along with an impressive potions table for a home lab. Several growing plants sat on an open shelf, a large cupboard she opened was filled with jars of potion ingredients, and stacks of half parchment sat neatly on his work table. Her throat tightened seeing their framed photos on his desk. One from Halloween. One from her book signing. And the one that she couldn’t remember taking.

She picked it up, brushing her fingers over the image. It was slightly grainy, a close up of Draco's hand against her face, both their faces relaxed and yet intense as their lips crashed into one another.

"It's technically our first kiss." Draco said from the doorway. Her stomach fluttered. A strange combination of longing and apprehension swirled through her.

"Is the story going to make you look bad?" Hermione asked.

"Probably." Draco shrugged. "Would you like dinner? Or a drink?"

"Yes, to both." Hermione said, taking the framed picture with her.

Hermione explored Draco's house while he coordinated dinner. There were small nods to his upbringing, like his expensive taste in furniture and even thought it was a far cry from minimalism, his house was very organized. It still didn't contain the formality of the manor though, which Hermione appreciated. There was a stack of books on his nightstand, the bed that she assumed was the bed he originally gave her, was perfectly made with a thick fluffy comforter. Gods she missed that bed. Then she grinned and flicked her wand. Careful not to linger too long in his now bedless room. His ensuite bathroom had a large tub she was tempted to take a bath in.

Draco summoned her and they ate quietly and for once Hermione wasn't in a rush for whatever was about to happen. Plus she wanted the remaining veritas serum to be controllable, it would relax his tongue, but she didn't want it to be in the driver's seat. Not for this conversation. The longer they waited the better it would be for him. She felt an unwavering sense of peace and relief as they sat eating together. Like letting go of a heavy weight.

Once they finished their dinner, they sat on the sofa facing one another. "So," she sighed, "Tell me how terrible you are."

Draco sipped his wine and set it down slowly on the low table in front of them

Draco chewed on his lip, a rare nervous tick of his. "I think that most people over romanticize who I am." He swallowed, looking down at the couch. "I think people want me to have become a different person than I once was. As a child I was an asshole because I was taught to be one. I was taught to hate as much as a child could hate anyway, but I still did it. And when the cognitive dissonance began revealing the illogical beliefs of blood supremacy it didn't stop me from feeling better than others. I don't believe I'm better because of my blood lineage, I just think I'm better because I am. I'm selfish, Hermione. I'm greedy too. I'm still an arrogant, snob. I have narcissistic tendencies and it's likely that if I were to go to a muggle psychologist, I'd probably be diagnosed with a mild version of antisocial personality disorder. Empathy is not an easy thing for me to cultivate. I lie without second thought. I am not the good guy. I'm not Harry Potter. I am and have always been Draco Malfoy. The villain in the story. I am the person who sought self preservation most of their life. Who continues to seek it now. I am a coward. And you." He finally lifted his eyes to hers. "You are my antithesis. You are daylight. You are the heroine in the story. Everyone's story includes you being the force of good that helps others and saves the day. Including mine."

Hermione wanted to say something to comfort him, but she refrained, waiting for him to share his piece.

“The first two weeks in Azkaban were some of the hardest in my life. I was punished by both the guards for being a death eater and targeted by death eaters for my mother’s actions at the end of the war. It was so bad that they put me in solitary confinement. The only thing allowed with me were my legal files. I began reading through them, determined to get out of the prison. I wanted to find something, anything, that would help me get out of that place. I began at the beginning, reading through the evidence of my father’s involvement and other death eaters still on trial. After two weeks in isolation, I started to feel quite crazy. I hadn’t spoken to anyone. Food magically appeared three times a day. I wasn’t taken out of the room. I wasn’t given access to daylight or even the moon. I was physically alone for the first time in my life. I had felt lonely before many times, but there was always someone around or something to do to distract me. Once I started occluding in school it was easier to ignore how lonely I was. But in Azkaban, it was as if loneliness was compounded. And I couldn’t stop it from consuming me. Every day in isolation I was choking on it. I wanted to pound my head against the wall to stop feeling so much. Occluding felt impossible. There were no distractions, no purpose behind the use of energy. There was nothing to compartmentalize because there was nothing to do and nowhere for me to go. The case file was starting to feel like a burden, reminding me of how much I deserved the torment. One day I threw the files against the wall and your testimony fluttered out and landed in my lap. Like actually in my lap. I almost ripped it apart, but paused. During the trial, I occluded every minute I could. I barely registered what was happening. I was in complete denial. I knew I would going to prison and having even a small amount of hope was painful. So I stopped myself from feeling anything. It was the most occluding I’d ever done. I just went through the motions. I was surprised that you’d testified for me. I was even more surprised when I read your testimony. You recounted the events, yes, but you also added a personal testimony for me specifically.”

Hermione furrowed her brow, she had written a testimony, but she didn’t remember it being that significant.

Draco began reciting her testimony from memory, “Draco Malfoy’s involvement in the war should not be held against him. His family was threatened by Voldemort just like mine was. It is simply an unfortunate outcome that Draco Malfoy was born to his parents instead of mine. If we had been born in opposite places, I’d be on the other side of the war due to who my parents were. That is not something one can choose. It did not surprise me when Draco Malfoy interfered on our behalf while I was being tortured. His choices, in one of the most terrifying moments of my life, saved me. According to public testimony, he was punished for his interference that led to our escape with dark magic by his aunt. He was tortured, directly after me and for longer than me. And again the day after that, and the day after that and the day after that. Draco Malfoy is just like me. He was treated like me. Threatened like me. Punished like me. If you feel any sympathy for me, then you should feel it for him as well.

Because Draco Malfoy is just like me.” Draco’s voice cracked and he swallowed before continuing. “I believe that with the proper tools and support, Draco Malfoy can make amends for his crimes, recover from the trauma of war, and be a positive influence on society. He deserves to be given the opportunity to demonstrate his goodness. Because I saw it first hand on a night I believed I would die. I saw it in the way he put himself in harm’s way for his

mother's safety. I saw it when he thought no one else was looking. His goodness may have been painted over a few times by the circumstances, but it is still there. I can see it and I hope you can see it too. If you can't, I hope you at least allow him the opportunity to show you. When you think of Draco Malfoy, I want you to think of me. Because Draco Malfoy is just like me. And if you wouldn't punish Hermione Granger, you shouldn't punish Draco Malfoy."

Hermione was crying, hearing him repeat her words with such tender reverence.

"I couldn't stop reading it." Draco said, clearing his throat. "I was hyper focused on your comparison. How could you think we were the same?" He shook his head, almost laughing to himself. "I was annoyed at your selflessness. I was angry that none of them listened to your testimony. And I was obsessed with the idea that you thought of me as your equal, even after the war. That you could see me at all was remarkable. For so long you took up such a large space in my mind, but occluding was easy to keep you away from the forefront of it. The time that led to the war I could only focus on myself and the safety of my family. The last thing I needed was Voldemort seeing inside my mind that you were... important to me in some way. I won't pretend to say I loved you or that I even liked you while we were in school, but I felt things for you that were hard to explain to myself." His jaw feathered.

"Once I read your letter it was like the floodgates opened and all of those feelings I had tucked away rushed in. I found myself overwhelmed with the thought of you. I honestly missed the loneliness at first. It was overpowering, because I didn't have anywhere to put my emotions. I couldn't do anything with them. I couldn't speak to you. I couldn't write to you. I couldn't see you. All I could do was read your testimony. I had it memorized in a couple of hours. I began reciting it so often it became a permanent hum in my mind." Draco shifted on the couch, reaching for his wine and taking a large swallow before he continued. "I was isolated for three months."

Hermione tears fell faster now, thinking of how miserable he was in there. How tortuous it would have been to be alone for so long.

"All I had was you. All I did was read your testimony. For three months. It was what kept me going. It gave me hope. Something I hadn't allowed myself to feel in years. When they finally allowed me back. The first thing I did was write to you. The thank you note for your testimony took me two days write, but I knew I had to reach out to you. I had to try. They put me back in isolation a couple of weeks later. My soul will never be untouched by dark magic. The link to Voldemort through the dark mark is always going to be on my skin. I will never not be who I am, but you made me believe that I could be redeemed in some way. That I could do something good in the world. Which gave me a purpose. Something that motivated me to wake up and not bludgeon myself. I planned to rid the world of death eaters." Draco shrugged. Hermione moved close to him, needing to touch him, she grabbed his hand, interlacing their fingers. He stared at their joined hands.

"When I got your letter, the fake one, that is. I was devastated. I had created a fantasy in my mind where I got released from Azkaban and you were there waiting for me. I wasn't angry at you, because you didn't do anything wrong. That fake letter felt like the truth. By that time however, your words had become my religion. My center of gravity. My anchor to reality.

That fake letter only made me think about the future even more seriously. Not only about what I could do for the world, but for you too. And you asked to never see me again, so I knew I could make that happen.”

“That’s why I could never find your name in the paper?” Hermione sniffled.

“It seemed like an easy thing to do for you.” Draco said, brushing his thumb across her hand. “My mother invited me to one of her charity events. I didn’t want to go, but I knew you’d be there. So I went. It was about a month after I was released from Azkaban. I cast a notice me not charm, only allowing my mother see me show up. Seeing you then, that was like breathing again. Like bathing in sunshine that I had been locked away from. I wanted to beg for your forgiveness. I wanted to ask you to dinner and talk about your books. I wanted to ask you how you tolerated my mother so well. I wanted to tell you how much your words meant to me. And when I saw a wizard ask you to dance I realized how much I wanted to do that with you too. How much I wanted to touch you and kiss you. And that was also when I realized how fucking creepy it was to feel that way about a woman who didn’t want to kiss me back, let alone see my face or hear my name. So I watched you, which was still creepy, but much less than trying to ask you out and tell you how much I loved your books.” Draco sighed.

“It was another month before I had to see you again. I just wanted a glimpse of you and so after one of my mother’s charity events I followed you. I just wanted to see what you’d do and where you went, I wanted to know everything about you. I think you almost saw me or felt like you were being watched because there was a second where I think we made eye contact and I apparated away immediately. From then, I only allowed myself to see you once a month. For the first two of years it was fine. I controlled myself easily. I checked on you in a way that made me feel better about your safety, your happiness. You always looked so happy laughing with Theo or Pansy. Even when you were alone at a cafe, reading, you looked so content. I promised myself I’d never disturb your happiness. In fact I felt the need to help you keep your happiness. So I tried to do things that would help you. I started buying your books in bulk. I started attending your speaking engagements. I told myself it was to help you, but I also know it was to see you more. The more I saw you the more I needed to see you. It was a vicious cycle, like an itch that only became itchier when scratched. When I saw that wizard spike your drink in the nightclub I almost lost it. I almost revealed I was there and killed him in front of everyone. You caught the poison before I could get it out of your hands. So I followed the scumbag home and killed him there. I made it look like a drug overdose. I don’t regret it. I rarely regret hurting other people who I think deserve it.” He rubbed a hand over his face, his jaw becoming tight. “When you started dating Ron, that was when I could admit to myself that I was in love with you. I knew of course, but it was also irrational and ridiculous, so I denied it for a long time. Then you were with Ron and it was the worst thing I could imagine. One because you’re too good for him and two once I started looking into his business practices it was shady as hell. I didn’t trust him but especially not with you. What could I do though? Telling you I was monitoring his business dealings wasn’t a great introduction. And the worst part, is that when you two were out together, you were happy and I couldn’t stop you from being happy. So I pulled away from you. Forcing myself to stop watching you as much, because seeing you with him was enormously difficult. It made me want to justify horrible ideas. I had already been working with Potter and I double downed on work. I focused all my efforts on making the world a better place for you.” He took a deep a

breath. “One weekend I was following a lead online where a few former death eaters talked about a special delivery happening at a muggle warehouse. It seemed too obvious to be leaked, so I guessed it was a trap for someone they wanted to catch. I didn’t know who the trap was for and I wanted to go observe the place. Potter was working and Blaise was out of the country, so I went alone. It was in an isolated part of town. There was a strong presence of magic coming out of the building, so I immediately put on a protection shield. After sneaking inside, I found each storage room held large amounts of black market potions. Potions that are highly regulated by the ministry and ingredients that were illegal or banned entirely like unicorn’s blood. I moved into a smaller room. It was dark, but the smell was so strong I could hardly breathe underneath my shields, I cast a smell repellent charm that helped me breathe properly. Then you came barreling through the doors, sliding against the floor and crashing into one of the pallets of potions. It was amortentia Hermione.” He looked up at her. “Raw amortentia.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. “Raw amortentia means that there was no identifiable love interest?”

“Right. And when you opened your eyes.” Draco trailed off...

“I was infatuated with you.” Hermione whispered. “This was in April?”

Draco nodded, his brow creasing.

“I don’t remember. It’s just what the healer told me.”

They were quiet for a few minutes. “There is a way I can show you.” Draco said. “I can show you my own memory.”

“I’m not a legilimens.” Hermione said.

“I think you’re a natural occlumens. Your library is perfectly organized and brilliant.” Draco replied.

“That’s just the first floor, where I keep the most current thoughts.” Hermione said as she considered Draco’s idea.

“The first floor? The most recent thoughts?” Draco’s shock was mixed with undeniable awe. “You really are an occlumens. Did you know you were one?”

Hermione shrugged. “I never cared to know. I’m good at compartmentalizing.”

“I think the connection between us makes entering my mind a lot easier now.”

“I’ll hurt you.” Hermione said, biting her lip.

“You might want to hurt me after the memory.” Draco said.

“Is it really that bad?” Hermione could only guess what happened between them. The photo of them sat on the low lying table, should she be mad he kissed her? Or did more? She still wanted to see it. She still wanted to know what he covered up.

"I think you should decide for yourself." Draco said. "Concentrate on our connection. Instead of going into your own mind, look into my eyes and I'll pull you inside of mine. You've surely read about the mechanics of it."

Hermione nodded, apprehension growing inside her. They stared at each other and Hermione tried to concentrate but her eyes fell to his lips instead and she leaned in to kiss him. Draco kissed her back immediately. Grabbing hold of her face and pulling her close, He fell backwards, pulling her on top of him. They laid small sofa facing each other, tangled in each other's arms Hermione opened her eyes, leaning her forehead against his, "I don't feel lost when I'm with you." Hermione said and grabbed for the connection between them, holding tightly. It was like trying to hammer through concrete. She could feel Draco's presence on the other side, guiding her and tugging on their rope. She felt her magic twisting, spreading over the concrete, trying to press harder through it and then suddenly she was on the other side.

They were in a forest. A dark, cool forest. It smelled like wet earth and fresh parchment. Had she been smelling this the whole time? His mind? What an odd thing.

"Hi." Draco stood in front of her, looking a little shy.

"Hello." Hermione responded. "What a nice forest you have here."

"I've had a lot of time to create my mental landscape. Come on." He waved a hand, beckoning her to follow. There was a well worn path in the forest and Hermione followed Draco as she marveled at the details. The muffled sounds, the birds in the trees, the slight breeze that tousled her hair. It was so intricate. The forest thinned and what stood before her took her breath away. It was a large castle, a fortress in its own right. The slate colored stone building towered over them with barbed wire and layers of magic she could almost taste on her tongue.

"Your security measures are impressive." She stared up at the locked building. Iron bars covered the windows and there was even a moat surrounding the castle, most likely swimming with unkind creatures.

"It's what I was trained to do." He replied. Hermione followed as the front doors opened for him as they approached. Several hallways darted out before them and Draco kept walking deeper into the maze of halls and rooms. "Wait, this was an actual maze." Hermione observed as they turned another corner, more hallways and doors appearing. There were a few that almost beckoned her to go down the opposite direction as Draco. "You're very clever."

"If anyone were to try to enter my mind without permission the best way to lose them is through distraction." Draco said over his shoulder.

"Has anyone made it through your mind?" She asked.

"Voldemort, Snape, and you." He replied, stopping at a plain door. The door was so plain it was almost invisible. It was unremarkable in every way. If she had been on her own, she wouldn't have stopped here. Draco looked at her, his eyes filled with nervous tension. "Once we go through the doors the memory will begin. We'll be there as observers. When it's over it'll take us out entirely." Draco stepped closer to her, he grabbed her hand and the sensation rippled through her physical body.

"That felt strange." Hermione whispered.

Draco furrowed his brow, "I didn't think I'd be able to physically feel you in here." Hermione stepped closer to him lifting onto her toes, pressing an exploratory kiss to his mouth. It was sensational, as ribbons of pleasure made their way through her body. "Huh." She considered as she turned towards the door. "I wonder what else we could do in here."

"You little minx." Draco whispered into her ear from behind her. She could feel him inhale and exhale. "Every terrible thing, Hermione. Please love me anyway." And then he opened the door.

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Mid April, 8 months ago.

Draco stared in disgust at the shelf labeled, *Unicorn's Blood*. There were a dozen small vials on the shelf. And another dozen on each of the ten shelves in front of him. A few drops were worth thousands of galleons. Even if someone were not trying to recreate the elixir of life, a few drops of unicorn's blood was certain to amplify a potions power. In the wrong hands it could be disastrous. It was certainly in the wrong hands now. He needed to contact Harry. The DMLE could seize the building by morning if he acted quickly enough. Draco left the room quietly, making his way down the dark corridor.

He paused at the next door, quickly casting a smell repellent charm. Gods, it was sickly sweet. Overly ripe strawberries and- Draco quickly understood what he was smelling and cursed under his breath. He entered the room slowly, closing the door behind him carefully. The room was filled with pallets of amortentia. Draco held his wand to the bottle, the purple pink swirls curled under his touch. He set it down and walked around the room, testing for magical signatures. No evidence left behind. Someone dropped these off and wiped it clean. If he could send a patronus perhaps Harry could be here within the hour. This would a career defining achievement for the Boy Who Lived. Fucker. Draco wouldn't be involved in the official reports. He never was. That was his choice, he didn't care for the spotlight or for the DMLE or for the ministry, but he could still lorde it over Potter's head that Draco gave this place to him on a silver platter. Draco shook his head. Smuggling potions was a common practice in the blackmarket, but never to this extent, this was the largest amount of amortentia he'd ever seen. The potion was the most powerful love potion available, while the name was misleading and didn't actually create true love, the impact of it created obsessive infatuation that left the person in a state controlled by their carnal desires and obsessive thoughts. If anyone had dosed Draco with a love potion, he'd be afraid to witness it. His obsessive

tendencies were already outlandish. A potion would only magnify that. He shivered at the thought. The mortification of being exposed like that, even if the feelings weren't real was repulsive.

"I think I saw someone!" A voice shouted down the corridor, Draco didn't have any more notice before someone barreled through the door. It slammed shut and Draco's eyes widened in disbelief, watching in slow motion as Hermione Granger stumbled into the room, sliding across the floor. Draco cast a imperturbable charm preventing whoever was following her from hearing the inevitable. She crashed into a pallet of potions and Draco rushed towards her.

"Granger." He whispered, his body was buzzing. He hadn't seen her in over a week and he missed her, but now he was touching her, picking her up. He'd never touched her before.

Hermione rubbed her head. Her blouse was stuck to her torso, wet from the potions on the ground. It was all over her. On her jeans, in her hair, dripping down her face. "Are you hurt?" he rasped, as he scanned her body looking for broken bones. There were glass pieces stuck along her shirt and on her bare arms. He hesitated momentarily before touching her. Part of him wanted to savor it, another part wished she would tell him to touch her. But when he saw her blood trickle down her arms, he stopped hesitating and brushed the glass away. Small pieces of glass scraped his palms, but he couldn't even begin to care.

Hermione Granger was standing before him and he was touching her and-

"Draco?" Hermione's voice was confused as she stared sleepily up at him.

"Yes." Draco said hardly audible, he could barely move, his hands still held onto her forearms. He braced for her reprimand, where she would scold him for touching her, for showing her his face.

"Draco?" Hermione's face morphed into a smile straight out Draco's dreams. There was longing written all over it. "Draco." She said again, with a measure of undeniable desire. Was he hallucinating? Hermione Granger leaned into him, pulling on his t-shirt, pulling him closer to her. The realization of what she was covered in crashed into him with unbearable embarrassment. Gods he was truly an idiot. Foolish and delusional and so bloody fucking stupid. Hermione was tugging on his belt buckle licking her lips.

Okay, this was actual hell.

"Granger." He hissed, pushing her hands away from his trousers. "What are you doing here?"

"To be with you." She whispered back, changing tactics and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"No, seriously what were you doing here? Who was following you?" Draco tried to gently push her off of him.

"The guards, but they couldn't see me. I sent them the other direction." Hermione shrugged.  
"Kiss me, Draco."

Draco groaned, "You just crashed into several dozen vials of amortentia. You don't want to kiss me. That's the potion talking."

"Oh." Her brow furrowed and it was so fucking adorable he wanted to melt. He wasn't used to be this close to her, being able to witness her micro expressions was incredible. "Well, kiss me anyway." She grinned, pawing at him again. Draco was pushed her away more adamantly now. What the actual fuck. The universe hated him.

"Stop." Draco said like he was speaking to a toddler. "It's inappropriate to touch me like that. You have a boyfriend. Aren't you supposed to be getting engaged or something?" The words felt as bitter as they sounded. Draco grabbed both her wrists, quickly restraining her hands and stopping her from groping his dick. He'd heard the rumors that Weasley would be getting married soon and this was definitely a question he wanted an answer to.

"I don't know." Hermione shrugged. "I'm not sure I want to marry Ron."

Draco smiled. "That's good to know. Wait, is that potion speaking?" Clearly he couldn't take anything she was saying seriously. He was a delusional idiot.

"You're much more handsome." Hermione leaned forward, almost falling as she leaned into kiss him. He ducked but she expected it because she leapt in front of him and tried to jump into his arms. He grabbed her waist, pushing her off of him before she could attach more limbs around him. She was like an octopus, latching a arm around him, just for another limb to find something to cling to.

Draco held up a finger. "No. Bad girl."

"I'll be a bad girl for you." She whispered and fucking hell if it didn't go straight to Draco's groin. Hell. This was literally fucking Hell.

"Check the other room. I swear someone was here and I'm not going to be the one to tell the boss something was stolen." A voice from down the hall called.

Draco looked around the room but there was nowhere to hide. Nowhere to go. If they found Draco they would try to blame him for the entire warehouse. If they found Hermione with him, they'd accuse him of taking her against her will, poisoning her with amortentia. If he left with her, the reality of the warehouse being cleaned out was almost guaranteed. He wouldn't be able to stop the use of these products. He wouldn't be able to get the DMLE here. He could easily duel them. And if he were alone, he might be willing to fight and expose the warehouse, but he wouldn't risk Hermione. More than anything, he was scared of what they would do to Hermione if anything happened to Draco and he wasn't here to protect her.

"Come here." He grabbed hold of her waist.

“Gladly.” Hermione smiled up at him, wrapping her arms around his neck again before they apparated into Draco’s flat.

“Oh I like this much better.” Hermione sighed, leaning against his chest. “Where’s your bed?” She looked up at him, eyes wide and full of lust. Draco frowned as he peeled her arms off his neck. “If you’re tired, sleep on the couch.”

She tossed her beaded bag on the couch and began walking around his house.

“No. You’re not going to my bedroom.” Draco grabbed her wrist.

“Alright.” Hermione gave him an easy grin, letting him steer her towards his study.

“We are going to make the antidote to the amortentia you’re soaked in.” He said, then his eyes widened. “Fuck I think I kidnapped you.” Draco began pacing, considering the implications of having taken Hermione from the warehouse. She was safe, but how would he explain this to her when she took the antidote? He ran a hand through his hair.

“Oh the amortentia antidote is such a fun potion to make.” Hermione sat upon the potions table, kicking her legs with joy. “Can I help you? You’re so handsome.” Draco inhaled and grabbed Hermione’s potion book off the shelf, flipping to the antidote section.

“Oh my gods. That’s my book!” Hermione squealed. “Do you like my books Draco?”

“Yes, you’re brilliant.” Draco said absentmindedly as he gathered the listed ingredients, pulling things off the shelves.

“Compliment me some more.” Hermione cooed. “I like it.”

“Do you, now?” Draco couldn’t help but chuckle looking up from the page. He knew the potions were forcing parts of Hermione’s personality out and he liked how flirty she was. He wondered if she was always like this with Ron. A cold sensation skipped down his spine. This was like a cursed gift. Hermione was here with him, flirting with him, unguarded and utterly beautiful. He’d only dreamed of being around her like this and yet knowing her enthusiasm was only because of the potion was a bitter reminder she wasn’t here because she chose to be. She didn’t actually want to see Draco. She didn’t want Draco at all.

She wanted that fucking oaf Weasley.

It made Draco a bastard, but there was the other realization that she would need to be here for the next twenty-four hours, thirty six hours if Draco did the extended simmer version of the potion. This made him more happy than he’d been in a very long time. He could enjoy her company. He could enjoy her flirting and her attention. It didn’t mean anything. He understood the difference between reality and the potion, but he could still enjoy it. That didn’t seem wrong. He was helping her after all.

“Do you think I should take off my clothes?” She said looking at him seductively, biting her lip.

Hell. Actual fucking hell.

“You can take a shower, that would probably help with your affliction.” Draco sighed.

“Okay.” Hermione said, jumping off the table and when Draco heard the sound of her clothes drop to the floor. He gritted his teeth and refused to turn around.

“I’ll be in the shower.” Hermione sang. And only then did Draco turn, glimpsing Hermione’s naked backside, hips swinging as she walked down the hallway.

*Holy fuck.* He groaned.

Draco spent the next fifteen minutes getting the base potion started. When it began to boil he stirred the pot counterclockwise, forcing himself to go as slow as the potion necessitated. He could hardly focus, it took considerable effort to do anything else besides think of Hermione naked in his shower. Once the potion was simmering, he reasoned he should at least check on her.

Hermione had not been in the shower, but in the bath and that was both better and worse. He leaned against the bathroom door frame, watching her. “You’ve made yourself at home, I see.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“You could join me.” She replied with her eyes still closed. “I could sit on your lap.”

“That’s incredibly tempting.” He said honestly.

“Why won’t you get in? Am I not pretty enough for you?” She opened her eyes with a frown.

“You’re the most beautiful woman in the world.” Draco said, feeling a strange emotion admitting it to her.

“Then why won’t you let me touch you?” Hermione’s body was covered in copious amounts of bubbles. It felt like a good safety net. As long as Draco stayed on this side of the bathroom, all would be well.

“Do you like bubble baths?” Draco asked, wondering what new things he could learn about her while she was here. The options for how to get her safely back home were obvious to him, but he didn’t want to dwell on it yet.

“Yes, I love them.” She grinned. “Especially when you’re in them with me.” Draco couldn’t help the small twitch of his lips. Her flirtiness was so damn cute.

“Are you hungry?” He asked. “I could order dinner. There’s a restaurant close by that I’ve been meaning to try.”

“Like a date?” Hermione smiled.

“Sure, like a date.” He shook his head as he made his way back to the living room. This would be hilarious if it wasn’t completely awful. How could he enjoy this when he had to let her go again? What if he kept her? No one would know... No one would suspect him. The thoughts he continued to have were dangerous. They were very thing that made her too good

for him. He organized the food delivery and then he grabbed a towel for her. Stopping to grab her clothes from the study and ridding them of the amortentia. It took three rounds of scourgify for her clothes to be cleaned. When he went back to the bathroom Hermione wasn't there. *Fuck*. He moved to his bedroom and found her, thankfully in one of his shirts, and not nude. A white button down from this closet.

"This shirt looks expensive." Hermione ran her hands over the sides of her body, shifting her weight on bare feet. He dragged his eyes up her legs. Gods. She was so fucking beautiful.

"Here." Draco said, handing her, her clean clothes.

"I'll wear this, actually." Hermione lifted her chin with stubborn defiance.

"At least put on your knickers." Draco said flatly.

"I think you'd like them if I kept them off." She smirked.

"I think you're the worst temptation I've ever known and you need to be wearing underwear in my house. And pants. Please put on pants." Draco pleaded.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Fine. Can I borrow some of your pants?" She said, but did not wait for a reply as she dug through his drawers grabbing his sweatpants. Draco turned rigidly as he realized she was going to dress in front of him. He forced himself out of the room quickly, calling back at her, "Come eat dinner with me."

"Yes, darling!" Hermione called. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"This is the worst fucking night of my life." Draco shook his head before grabbing the wine he set on the table and drank straight from the bottle.

"I'll take some wine too." Hermione smiled walking out in his oversized clothes. He'd taken her wand after she tossed it on the couch. He couldn't risk her tying him up or something amazing like that.

They sat on the couch, eating fish and chips. An upscaled version of the popular dish and it was delicious. Hermione's little moans were also delicious and annoying as hell.

"You know, this material might actually be compatible with one of my invention ideas." Hermione rubbed her greasy fingers against the monogrammed initials on his shirt collar and he had the urge to lick it off. Any other person he would have scolded for ruining his shirt, but her? He wanted her fingers all over that shirt. He wanted to wear that shirt for the rest of his life.

"What invention?"

Hermione sighed, "You don't want to hear about it. I'm sure it will bore you. What do you like to do Draco?"

"You're in luck, because my favorite pastime is to learn about you."

“Don’t flirt with me or else I might think you like me.” Hermione moved closer to him, setting down her food.

“I do like you.” He said, sadly. “But you don’t like me.”

“I love you.” Hermione frowned. Draco stilled. That was too much. He couldn’t do this. He should call Potter and explain the situation and somehow explain how she was in his clothes and... fuck. Did Potter trust him that much? What if he didn’t believe him and believed the warehouse owner instead? What proof did he have that he didn’t poison her? How would they prove his innocence. He couldn’t go back to Azkaban. He couldn’t risk never being able to see Hermione.

Draco sighed. “Tell me about your invention ideas, please.”

“Alright.” She smiled. “I have a list of things I’d like to create one day. One of those being some kind of armor in our clothing. Not just a shield or a spell of protection, but woven into the fabrics of the garment. That way the article of clothing could respond to different stimuli. It’s complex magic, but it would be revolutionary for aurors or any kind of defense against the dark arts.”

Draco continued to listen to her, lost in the sound of her voice. Hermione shared detailed explanations of her amor idea. She had the entire plan laid out, simply in her head.

He asked her questions and challenged some of her theories and it was... fun.

She moved closer to him, and he didn’t stop her. He knew it wasn’t a good idea, it was stupid, but he couldn’t help himself. Or maybe he could and just didn’t care. He loved her so much. He loved her from afar and he desperately wanted to love her up close. Maybe she’d let him. Maybe she’d be okay with seeing his face.

“Am I boring you?” She asked, leaning her head against his shoulder, peering up at him with pretty amber eyes.

“Not in the least.” He smiled down at her.

“Let’s eat dessert.” She popped off the couch and ran into the kitchen.

Draco took the opportunity to check on the potion. It was simmering nicely and he once again was reminded that this would all end and it wasn’t real.

“Which method are you using?” Hermione stood in the doorway. “I think the thirty-six hour one is the best version.” She smiled at him. He was certainly going to hell for this, if he wasn’t already in hell now. Maybe he had been the one to knock into a lethal potion and this was the afterlife. Hmm. Not a bad afterlife...

He sighed, “I agree. Thirty-six hours creates the highest quality.”

Her smile widened, “Is this where you kiss me now?”

“I wish I could.” He replied. “I really, fucking wish.”

Hermione frowned. “If you won’t kiss me, then what will we do? Can we fuck without kissing?”

Draco choked. “Gods damn it witch.” He moved past her and back to the living room. “We can do platonic things.” He said, his mind running through a list of safe things to do with Hermione Granger that didn’t make him a horrible person.

“Platonic?” Hermione whined. “I don’t want to be your friend. I want to be your lover!” She chased after him. “I want romance. You said this was a date, I don’t want our date to be finished. How can it be a date if we are only platonic.”

He turned to her abruptly, which was a bad idea as Hermione collided into his chest with a celebratory moan.

“Fine.” He gritted out, hearing her beg for his affection was going to make him lose his mind and any control he’d ever had. He wanted to kiss her, he wanted to fuck her, he wanted to love her so desperately and he couldn’t. He hated this. This was the worst fucking day of his life.

“You’ll kiss me?” Hermione’s hands slid up his chest and he stopped them, slapping his own hands over hers.

“No, but you can call this whatever you’d like and I won’t correct you. Granger.” He inhaled slowly. “You’re under a potion that makes you believe you love me when you don’t. So we can do things that are not kissing or having sex. Something friends would do. Platonically dating.” He nodded.

“Don’t insult me. I don’t want to be your friend. I refuse to be your friend.” Hermione stood on tiptoes, trying to reach his mouth.

“Stop it.” He said, grabbing her wrists. “This only works if you cooperate, otherwise I can’t have you close to me.”

Hermione pouted, “Fine.” She rolled her eyes. “Come feed me fruit.” Draco followed her and found the dining room, in the short time he’d been gone, had been turned into some kind of chocolate fondue station. Strawberries, brownies, small cakes, whipped cream, and other desserts were spread all over his dining room table. Centered around a large chocolate fountain.

“How did you do this?” He gaped at the table.

“Oh, I’m a witch. I use something called magic.” Hermione pulled out a chair for him and patted the seat.

“Yes, but I have your wand.” Draco’s brow furrowed as he sat beside her.

“I used yours.” She shrugged, grabbing a strawberry dipping it in chocolate and whipped cream and handing it to him.

Draco stared at her in silent shock. “You what?”

"I found your wand in the kitchen and it worked for me." Hermione began eating the strawberries and chocolate. Draco shook his head in disbelief. His wand responded to her...

"I love dessert." She said cheerfully.

"Me too." Draco chuckled, still in disbelief at the entirety of the situation.

"I love that we have that in common." Hermione smirked. "What else do you think we have in common?" She leaned into him and Draco gave in. He wouldn't resist enjoying this. He had her for thirty three more hours. He would enjoy every fucking moment. There was no point in regretting his decisions. He couldn't change that she was here.

"Let's find out." He smiled. They chatted about books and music. About Hermione's work and her upcoming book release for muggleborns. He made a mental note to send a donation to McGonagall. He fed her strawberries and found himself so relaxed he absentmindedly wiped chocolate off her lip, licking it off his thumb.

"Will you dance with me?" Hermione said suddenly. "That's fine, right? It follows all of your rules?" Hermione stood, holding her hand out.

"Yes, I think it does." He said, quietly. He vanished the living room table and chairs, giving them a large dancing space and put on Etta James' *At Last*, on the record player, before pulling her close. They danced in silence, but they did not once stop looking at each other.

*It's not real. It's not real. It's not real.* He reminded himself as he spun her around. It may not have been real for her, but gods did it feel real to him. And so perfect. She was fucking perfect.

"Another dance." She whispered to him.

"Alright," he agreed eagerly. They danced for over an hour. Some slow songs, some fast ones. They were both laughing by the end of it. He was much too comfortable touching her, but he found himself hardly caring. Instead he enjoyed the feel of intertwining both of his hands with hers, listening to her laugh against his chest.

"The salsa is not for me." She chuckled.

"I disagree." Draco said. "I really liked watching you try."

She sighed, "I want to make coffee." She pulled away from him, humming to the music still playing. He'd played a variety of music from the sixties, seventies and eighties. He'd make his way to the nineties soon. He followed her to the kitchen, she still wore his sweats and collared shirt. He wanted to memorize everything about her. This horrible gift was going to live in his mind for the rest of his life and he didn't want to forget a single detail. His heart skipped a beat thinking about how painful it would be to say goodbye.

"Wait" Draco said. "It's almost midnight. Why are you making coffee?" He watched her use his espresso machine with ease. What would she do if she knew he bought that thing because of her? He knew how much she enjoyed espresso and he bought it to learn how to make it himself.

"Well, if you are doing the thirty-six hour method, I don't want to waste my time with you by sleeping right now." Her back was to him and he was grateful because the sadness and longing he felt right then was written all over his face. If she only knew how much he loved her.

"I love you." He blurted out. She turned, smiling. "I know. And I love you." That snapped him back to reality. Fuck why was he such an idiot.

"You don't. That's the potion speaking."

Hermione frowned. "What will happen when I take the antidote?"

Draco only stared at her.

"You're going to oblige me, aren't you?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Yes." He said. "I'm sorry, but I haven't found another way to keep us both safe."

Hermione was silent, looking at her toes. When she looked up at him she said, "Alright, what else are we allowed to do? Can we cuddle on the couch?"

Draco was draped around Hermione on the couch five minutes later, both having drank their espressos rather quickly. Draco was a horrible person, taking advantage of her like this. His fingers played with her hair and his other fingers danced along the bare skin of her stomach. Hermione explained more of her ideas, more of her dreams and hopes.

Hermione grabbed his hand and kissed each of his fingers.

She talked to him about her father and his dentist practice. He almost blurted out another confession to her, but managed to refrain. She explained what dentistry was. When she didn't mention her mother, he didn't pry. They talked about potions and poetry and her books. He would listen to her all night, but somewhere around two in the morning she yawned.

"Goodnight darling" She whispered. Draco didn't sleep. He didn't want to. He was tired, but his body was alive for the first time in his whole pathetic existence of a life. She was everything to him. And this made him stay awake. He wanted to know what it was like to hold her as she slept so that's what he did. He listened to her breathe and pulled her close to him. He inhaled her scent and wished that everything was different. How could he go on in life without her?

He woke to the sounds of food sizzling and dishes clanking. He sat up slowly wondering when he fell asleep and what time it was.

"Good morning." Hermione's chipper voice should have startled him, but it gave him relief that it wasn't all a dream. She handed him a plate of food and sat beside him on the sofa.

"I checked on the potion." She replied. "It'll be ready by tomorrow morning, but until then, we can do more platonic dating things. Unless you're tired of me. I understand I can be annoying. Do you think amortentia has truth serum effects? It's got me thinking because I'm

expressing my feelings at an alarming rate. You're so bloody gorgeous do you know that? Like you're really beautiful Draco. It's alarming how sexy you are. I was tempted to take your clothes off while you slept, but we stayed up so late that i wanted you to get rest. "

"I could never get tired of you." Draco smiled wide. "What time is it?"

"Noon." She returned his smile.

They spent the rest of the day playing chess which Hermione won two out of the three games of. They watched Roger Rabbit, the next movie on Draco's list to move him through the eighties. They read together, tangled up in each other's limbs. They cooked dinner together and all the while Hermione flirted endlessly with him. Draco shamelessly flirted back. His own admissions of his feelings flowed easily from his mouth. He touched her anytime he wanted. They were back on the sofa, listening to music. Half a bottle of wine and an empty bowl of fruit and whipped cream they'd eaten together were on the table next to them. It was heaven. It was hell. It was incredible.

"So you love me?" Hermione said after a few minutes of silence.

"I do." Draco replied, they were facing each other knees touching.

"But you're a coward so you won't tell me in real life?" Hermione inched closer bringing her legs ontop of his.

"Yes." He said, leaning closer to her without a second thought.

She ran a finger down his arm, along the tattoos of her handwriting and birth flowers, around the dragon and dark mark. He shuddered at the sensation.

"Pretend with me." She whispered.

"Pretend?"

"Pretend I'm real. Practice. Practice telling me. What would you say to me if this was real."

Draco swallowed and his eyes glanced at her lips and back to her eyes. Her finger created lazy circles in the palm of his hand.

"I would tell you how pretty you are."

She smiled, biting her bottom lip.

"I would tell you that I think you're perfect."

"That's not true. I'm very imperfect. If anyone knows my flaws you would." Hermione frowned.

"I would tell you I love your flaws." Draco said.

Her mouth parted as if to argue and then her brow furrowed, "That's really kind... actually." She looked up at him eyes glassy, her cheeks bloomed with red heat. He placed a hand over her cheek, needing to feel her against his skin. She leaned into his hand.

"What else?" She murmured.

"I would tell you how good you are. How much you mean to me."

"What do I mean to you Draco?" She rasped.

"Everything. You're everything to me, Hermione."

"And what would you do to me?" Hermione's breath hitched, blowing soft sweet lingering of air on his face as she adjusted herself on his lap. Draco's hands slid up her bare thighs. She'd taken off his sweatpants at some point and he'd never bothered to stop her. His hand moved underneath his white button up shirt, landing on silky strips of fabric at her hips.

"I'd...I'd... kiss you...I'd kiss you everywhere." He said. Draco had done a good job not daydreaming about things he couldn't have. He didn't go out of his way to imagine what it was like to kiss her. At least not often. It was too painful. Too hard to recover from the reality that she didn't want him. But right now, with her straddling him and her soft skin beneath his hands. He let himself imagine it. "I'd kiss along your thighs and pussy." Hermione's eyes fluttered. "I'd fuck you with my mouth, so I could taste every part of you."

"What else?" She breathed and her hips rocked ever so slightly.

"I'd suck on your breasts, your neck, your ass." He whispered. "There wouldn't be an inch of skin that didn't have my mouth on you."

She moaned quietly and Draco could get drunk on the sound.

"I'd undress you with my teeth and have you ride me just like this." His cock twitched and he gritted his teeth. "But we'd take our time. Nice and slow." His own breathing was short now. Gods. He wanted her so badly. A few movements and his pants could be down. It would be too easy to fuck her right now.

"And then what?" Hermione cried louder, her hips moved harder now and he let her grind against his cock.

"I'd fuck you from behind after that." He said, "Hard and fast. I'd pull your hair and bite your skin and make you scream."

"Oh Draco." At the sound his name he groaned and pulled her off abruptly.

"I'm sorry." He said getting off the couch. "We can't. You can't. I can't. Fuck." He pulled his hair. Hermione ignored him entirely and slipped her hands in between her legs. "Then you can watch." She said spreading her legs wide for him to see everything. He went rigid. He should leave. He should run to the bathroom and lock the door. He should have done that. But he didn't. He moved to the armchair, sat down, and watched.

Hermione panted as she thrust her finger insider her cunt.

“Tease yourself.” He found himself saying. “Go slower. You need to be teased.”

Hermione closed her eyes, slowing her finger, swirling around her clit. “What else?” Hermione asked, “Tell me what to do.”

“Place two fingers in your mouth.” Draco was a bad person. He’d already accepted this, so what if he enjoyed her like this? Nothing would matter tomorrow morning. He’d obliviate her and she’d forget everything. Hermione sucked on her two fingers and Draco sighed in a lusty exhale. “Drag your fingers down your neck.” He commanded. “And stop when you’ve reached your left nipple.” He watched her through half lidded eyes. “Now pinch hard, as you touch your clit.” She obeyed so easily it was going to ruin his ego. “Good girl.” he murmured and she moaned at the praise. “Keep pinching and thrust three fingers inside yourself.” Gods he wanted to kneel down before her and help her. He gripped the armchair and his other hand moved to his cock. “Harder.” He rasped.

“Which part?” She huffed hardly able to breathe.

“Both.” He slid his hand under his trousers and stroked himself. This would be the closest he’d ever get to fucking her, to loving her like this.

“Keep going, you’re doing so good.” he breahed. He was going to come faster than he’d come as teenager. Having her aorund the last twenty-four hours was a constant turn on.

“I’m going to come.” She said, moaning loudly, clenching her eyes shut.

“Come for me.” He replied already feeling his own orgasm begin. His balls tighened as her thighs quivered and the wetness of her pussy dripped down her ass. He wanted to suck it off her body.

“Oh gods. Oh gods.” Hermione panted as she came hard against her hand which made Draco come as a result. It was so fucking powerful.”Yes, just like that. Good girl.” His come shot out hard and he wanted to spread it on her chest and press it insider her cunt. He wanted to mark his terriorty and own her. Hermione sighed contedly, keeping her eyes closed. Draco stood and moved to the bathroom to clean himself up. Whether she knew what he had done or not, he couldn’t risk her jumping across the coffee table or else he would fuck her. Afer cleaning himself up, he splashed water on his face. He needed to get a hold of himself. If Hermione were to ever choose him, he wanted her to be complicit in the choice. He was walking on a dangerous line. Instead of going to the living room, he checked on the potion needing more space from her. He didn’t trust himself and his once strong as stone boundaries around Hermione were dissolving into dust and being swept away by the wind.

Once he had his breathing under control again he heard her in his room. She was in his bed, in a tshirt of his. What a perfect view. He crawled into bed without second thought.

“We can sleep together.” She said. “Plantonically.”

“I don’t sleep with my friends.” Draco replied.

"Which is why aren't friends." Hermione huffed as she laid against his chest. "Platonically dating is stupid."

"The worst." Draco agreed. "But also pretty fantastic." He rubbed her arm and found himself exhausted. Falling asleep with her was probably just as good as kissing her. Not that he would know, but it felt pretty damn good.

The next morning Draco woke holding onto Hermione and his throat tightened painfully. He had to say goodbye today. He had to let her go and it made him ache. He pulled away from her. He'd make breakfast today. He wanted to spoil her. Even if she never remembered, he would. And he would never forgive himself if he didn't take the opportunity to give her everything he wished he could everyday. If she was his...

The morning went by too fast. Hermione tried relentlessly to get Draco to shower with her. A fucking Order of Merlin worthy for his adamant refusal if you ask him. He massaged her feet as she read to him. He danced with her once more time before he finished the potion. He took it off the fire, letting it cool completely before measuring out doses. He loved her, but she wasn't his. He belonged to her, but she didn't belong to him. Even if it felt like he'd never be whole with out her. Even if touching her and holding her in bed had felt like coming home. He occluded all of his emotions away as he finished.

"Come here." She said, pouting on the couch.

"It's ready for you." He said setting down the potion in front of them. He sat by her and she crawled into his lap.

"Please kiss me." She said. "Please. Before I go, before I forget. I just want to kiss you." Her fingers toyed with his hair and her eyes were watering and he was a fucking horrible person. He wanted it too. Just once. It couldn't hurt right? He leaned in and kissed her.

She moaned against his mouth and he found himself moaning too. The kisses were soft and languid. Her hands held his face and he had to forcefully pull his face away. He held her hands in between them.

" You have to go home, Hermione." Draco said. "We have to stop." He tried his best to sound like he meant it but it was so hard. He wanted nothing more than to drag her back to his bed and keep her here forever. What kind of life would that be? Especially for her. She needed to be out in the world creating good things.

"No." She curled herself smaller into his lap. "I want to stay with you. I love you."

He sighed. He hated hearing that. It dug into his skin, like sharp talons. It hurt.

She lifted her face, tears building in eyes "You don't love me?"

"I love you so fucking much it should scare you." He grabbed her chin.

"Then kiss me, you prat!" Hermione smacked his chest, gripping his shirt.

“Hermione.” His voice was strained, a plea for her to stop. He was supposed to be the one in charge. Nothing they were doing was consensual. Nothing he did to her was real for her. It was a fantasy.

“Touch me Draco” She begged, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“What the bloody fuck am I supposed to do with you?” Draco looked at the ceiling.

“Kiss me. Touch me. Fuck me.”

“Fucking hell Granger.” He groaned.

She pressed her lips against his neck. He growled and before he could say anything else Hermione kissed him again and he didn’t stop her. Draco kissed her like he had always wanted to. He kissed her like he’d never kiss her again. It was desperate, imbued with every feeling for her could communicate with just his lips. His hands moved on their own accord roaming and feeling her body. Memorizing every inch of her.

She rocked against him. “I want to fuck you. Right now.”

“You have to leave.” Draco said, his forehead leaning against hers. His hand stroked up her leg, reveling in the soft skin of her thighs.

“You don’t want me to leave.” Hermione whispered.

“We shouldn’t be doing any of this.” He said, his eyes locked on hers.

Hermione sighed, pouting her lips. “So you just want to be my friend?”

“No. I don’t want to be your friend. I want so much more Hermione but… I’m a coward, so instead of trying to approach you, I hide and I watch you.”

“Aww! Like a secret admirer.” She smiled.

Draco huffed a laugh, “Something like that, but you’re going to hate me if I keep touching you. If I keep kissing you. You already hate me.” He trailed a finger down her arm.

“I don’t hate you, I lo-“ he pressed his fingers against her mouth.

“Stop saying that.”

“Why? You said it to me.”

“Yes, because I actually love you, but you’re not of sound mind at the moment. Which is why we need to get you home.” Draco sighed and got off the couch.

“Go get dressed.” He said and thank Merlin she listened to him. She came back in her amortentia free clothes and they held each other’s stare.

“You’re going to take the potion. It’ll take fifteen minutes or so for the full effect to kick in. Maybe longer because you were exposed to so much amortentia. Once I’ve give you the

potion, I'll cast notice me not charms on both of us, apparate you to your flat, and oblivate you. From there I'll give you instructions pertaining to the alibi I've arranged for you."

Hermione was crying and Draco occluded heavily. He approached her with the bottle of antidote. "You're brilliant Hermione. You're going to change the world with your work and I'm so grateful to know you. You can do anything you dream of. Don't stop working. Don't stop believing in yourself." He wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'll always be on your side. I'll watch you. I'll never stop loving you from afar." He held her face one last time and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Any more than that and he wouldn't be able to stop himself. It was painful enough.

"Draco." Hermione's voice cracked and it snapped something inside his chest. "Just try. Try to talk to me. Promise me. Promise me you'll try." She placed her hand on his, holding it to her face.

"I promise." He whispered, but it was a lie. If he ever tried, he didn't think he could survive being rejected by him. She couldn't love him like he loved her, who could? Who could love a death eater? He'd never speak to her, because she didn't want him. She didn't want to see him or speak to him. Because this wasn't real and she wasn't his and he was a horrible person who didn't deserve her affection.

He held the potion up to her mouth and Hermione cried as she swallowed.

## Chapter 33

“That’s it?” Hermione said, pushing off of the couch. They were back in Draco’s flat and away from the memory he’d obliivated from her mind. She didn’t remember it, but seeing it play out helped her understand Draco so much better.

Draco frowned, sitting up slowly, “That’s it? Did you not just see the same memory I did?”

“Well I think so. I don’t know. I assumed that little tidbit about you fucking me in a grocery store alley might be real. And I spent quite a lot of time figuring out how I’d feel about that scenario and so I think I’m underwhelmed?”

Draco stared at her and shook his head. “Can’t you see? This memory is the epitome of why I don’t deserve you. I could have stayed at that warehouse and fought those wizards. I could have exposed their illegal potions operations. Those potions were used on innocent people, Hermione, but I didn’t stay and save the day, because I wouldn’t risk your life over any number of innocent people. I didn’t call Harry for help. I waited for as long as possible to return you home. I touched you and kissed you and watched you because I wanted you more than I cared about how you’d feel about it. I needed our first sexual experience together to be consensual, probably half a percent more than I didn’t need it to be. That’s how close I was to fucking you under a love potion! There is something genuinely wrong with me. I am stained with the memory of Voldemort’s magic, I have his dirty magic in my veins. It’s like maggots eating rancid meat inside my soul. It will never heal. But Voldemort didn’t make me this way, it just exposed what was already there. What I was always capable of. I am not just afraid of you running away because of the things I share with you like buying the restaurant. I’m afraid because I’m waiting for you to see who I really am. You confirmed it that morning in Paris. That even if you were with me by your choice, you’d run away. You’d realize who I was and regret it.”

“Draco that’s-“

“I don’t care though.” Draco continued, ignoring Hermione’s protest. “That’s what makes me so selfish, Hermione. I don’t care if I’m bad for you. I don’t care if you regret me. I am not a good person. don’t care about most people as long as they aren’t in my way.” His nose flared as he inhaled. “I want to bind my soul to yours, I want to marry you, and build a future together and love you for the rest of my life and any life that exists beyond death. I want you forever. And by wanting that, by needing you, I’m damning your soul too. You’re so bloody good. You would have had a brilliant plan in that warehouse. You would have done something heroic and exposed the potion smuggling and saved hundreds of people. In every way that matters you are good. You’re soul is pure and worthy of someone just as brave and good as you. You should be with someone who is your equal and I still don’t care.” He took another deep breath. “I worship you Hermione. Quite literally. Your testimony is the prayer I’ve repeated for years. I pray using your testimony to remind myself that I can do something good in the world. The best thing I’ve ever done is keep you safe. Keeping you happy and alive in the world makes this world a better place. I don’t deserve who you are. I know all of this and I still don’t care. I’m so selfish I’d rather damn your soul with mine than to live

without you. I'd rather poison your soul with Voldemort's magic by binding myself to you, just so I don't have to ever say goodbye. To know all of the things I've done and still ask for you to trust me, love me, and choose me, is the wrong thing to do. But you are my ultimate form of self preservation Hermione. I need you more than anything else. I love you more than anything else. I still choose myself when it comes to you, because to choose you *is* to choose myself."

Hermione swiped the tear that fell down Draco's cheek, kissing him briefly before she stood up. Hermione began pacing, shaking her fingers out, forcing herself to breathe as slowly as possible. Mentally rehearsing what she needed to say.

"If you're going to leave now, that feels very cruel." Draco hung his head. Hermione inhaled slowly.

"Draco, I... well I... Gods how do I say this. Draco, I-" Hermione scrubbed at her face. "I just need to say it. Draco, I-" Hermione stopped, rubbing her temple in small circles. "Gods this is fucking difficult."

Draco lifted his head, hope sparkling in his eyes, "You're not leaving?"

"Of course not." Hermione sighed in frustration. "Draco you are...I am...uh...Well I..." Hermione swallowed. "I can do this. I can do this." She repeated.

Draco's eyes narrowed, "Every terrible thing." He said, "and let me love you anyway."

Hermione locked her eyes on his and said, "Draco, I wanted to kill you." Hermione's eyes widened and she smiled brightly, "Wow, that feels so good to get off my chest."

Draco pursed his lips together. "I will admit that's not exactly what I expected you to say."

"I lied to everyone when I was looking for my parents." Hermione put her hands on her head. "I told everyone it took me a year to find my parents, but I found them within ten days." Hermione let out a long sigh, "The first month after war was the ministry pulled us into meeting after meeting after gala after celebration. I was tired, but felt more motivated than ever to get things normal again. To change the systems that upheld blood supremacy. I watched your trial and felt so angry at the systems of corruption were still visible in our own government. They wanted to celebrate and ignore the issues that led to the rise of Voldemort. Every suggestion I had was turned down with excuses of funding issues. Instead of engaging in any preventative measures they wanted to get short term justice by pleasing the crowd of voters that wanted you and your father in Azkaban. I was privy to a large majority of the political conversations regarding you and your father's punishment. You were a political campaign Draco. Your sentencing was as trivial to them as deciding their lunch orders. They were doing polls and survey's trying to studying the best way to move past the war. It made me sick.

Your sentencing felt like a joke. No one actually cared about solving any problems. They just cared about money and power. I left to Australia right after your sentencing. It was then that the whole war hit me. Like it really hit me." Hermione stopped pacing as her voice broke on the words." After years of stress and hyper-vigilance, I finally had nothing to do. So I poured

all my energy to find my parents. I started writing my books at night when I couldn't sleep. I stopped responding to everyone's messages, I told myself I'd talk to everyone when I found my parents. But I found them much sooner than I expected and I froze because they looked so happy. They were just enjoying life. Carefree and happy. I didn't want to disturb it. I didn't want to burden them with the pain I carried. So I lied to everyone and told them I was still looking for them." She shook her head. "I waited over three months to talk to them. It was your thank you letter that gave me the hope to try. To think of the future I could have."

Hermione inhaled sharply. "And so I finally approached them and began the obliviation process. It took several months to complete the spell. I could only do one of my parents at a time and trying to rebuild years of memories is a painstakingly slow process. I had written you a few times then. I felt desperate and annoying, but I kept writing you because I hadn't spoken to anyone about anything real for months. I traveled back and forth from Australia and England regularly. I was writing books, volunteering and making friends with Theo and yet, I didn't say anything to anyone because I was depressed and overwhelmed and extremely lonely. I am very good at compartmentalizing my feelings and when I was in England I was able to pretend to be normal and when I was in Australia I fell apart a little. I was ready to have my parents back and have them comfort me through it. But it didn't happen that way. My mother was polite at first." Hermione began to cry. "She asked me questions about the magic and myself and then one day she was hysterical. She was begging me to reverse it. To oblige her again. To put her back in to her other life. When I oblige them, I took away all memories of myself and taking me away took away the pain of her other miscarriages away. Her losses hit her again in a new way and she hated it. She hated me because she told me she knew a life without wanting children. I told her I couldn't give her back her old life, that the only other option was to oblige her again and redo it, but she would forget the new life she established, it would take time to rebuild it again. She left angry and we didn't see her for over a six weeks. When she returned she asked my father to choose between her or me. I was devastated.

It was mortifying and shameful. I hated myself for it. For ruining their happiness and causing so much trauma for them again. My father immediately asked for a divorce. I had to get out of there because the look on my mother's face when he did so was a lethal blow. I stayed with Harry when I was in London throughout that year because I would stay with him at Grimmauld place so that's where my mail was being forwarded to. I went back to Harry's and that's when I received your letter. That letter felt like the killshot. I was wrecked in every way. Harry and Ron were with me when I told them about what happened with my parents and your letter. Reading your letter at that moment I reasoned everything was your fault." She glanced up at his eyes. His expression was hard to read, but there was fear in his eyes that made her chest ache.

"If you hadn't let the death eaters into Hogwarts would things be different? If you hadn't taken the dark mark would things be different? If you hadn't attempted murdering Dumbledore would things be different? I began having violent fantasies about your death." Hermione frowned. "Very detailed ones."

"I planned at least ten different ways I could kill you inside Azkaban." Hermione sighed. "I was volunteering with your mother for crying out loud and friends with Theo. I genuinely liked them and enjoyed them and I still recognized that being around them got me closer to

you. Which meant it would be easier to kill you." Hermione huffed. "I had signed up to visit you in the prison and then I canceled then cancelled the meeting. That's when I started seeing a mind healer because my plans were scaring me. I didn't actually want you dead. I felt rejected by you. After writing you several times. Just to have it confirmed that everyone in my life hated me. I just wanted to feel hope again and for so long you were the source of my hope and motivation to change things around me. My mind healer was invaluable as they helped me sift through the trauma of the war, my mother, your letter, and my strange feelings towards you."

Draco swallowed, looking as if he might say something and then stopped.

Hermione shifted on her feet. "The thing is, I *was* at Azkaban when you got released.

Draco sucked in a sharp breathe. "It was a notice-me-not charm. And when I saw you I expected to see someone worth my anger, but in reality you were just...you. The same Draco Malfoy I knew in school. The same boy who teased me and glared at me in hallways. The same boy that I had thought about often. Harry and Ron would talk about you a lot in school and I'd defend you all the time. I assumed it was because I like to be contrary, but now I think I just worried about you even then. You were released and I was there I was having hope again. It didn't make sense. But my mind latched onto you like a compulsion. I began wondering what you'd do next and wanted to see how you chose to live after Azkaban. I found myself both worried and curious about your experience. I looked for your name every day when I read the daily prophet. Every day I wondered what Draco Malfoy was doing. I worked on boundaries with you, it was only in the mornings that I allowed myself to think of you. I could search for you name and if I found it I could read about you. I didn't ask about you to anyone. That felt too weird. But I think I secretly hoped to run into you. I always thought Theo and Pansy would one day say, "oh Draco's going to come is that alright?" Or maybe your mother would say, "Hey stay for dinner Hermione, Draco will be here."

Draco face crumpled at her words. "We were circling around each other." He said hoarsely.

"Yeah. It seems so." Hermione said. "I couldn't even admit it to myself fully. I had no reason to want to talk to you. Other than to slap you for your letter. But I didn't inquire about you because I thought if it was going to happen it would. I'm not big on fate or destiny, but when it came to you. I decided that's what I'd leave it up to. Chance. I liked you as much as I disliked you. I enjoyed hearing about you from our friends or your mother, but then I'd go home and remember your letter and it brought up so much pain. Thats around the time I started hexing shit in your room. Stealing things just because I wanted to fuck with you. It was a ridiculous cry for attention. because it made no sense to me that I was so close to you and yet never ran into you. It made me think you were avoiding me on purpose and I didn't want you to have the last word from our letter. I had never written you back, so I thought maybe I'd lecture you if I saw you at the manor. Or if you suspected me of vandalism I'd tell you you deserved it. But that never happened. And I was lonely. Ron asked me out regluarly. He pestered me with it and I was tired of fighting him. I was tired of everything." Hermione swallowed. "When I broke up with Ron I remember having a fleeting thought that I could do anything I dream of and Ron wasn't supporting my dreams."

"I knew it was your birthday and I felt drawn to that restaurant. It felt stupid, but I couldn't stop going. I considered it another one of my compulsions. Another reason why Ron was right about me. Seeing you in your restaurant on your birthday was overwhelming. Ron hadn't stopped harassing me. I had just recently seen my dad and my mother had just contacted him. I was angry with you all over again. You were kept in a nice little chamber of my mind and I didn't know how to act. I didn't leave Paris because I regretted it. I left because I knew you'd regret me. I believed that you hated me and I was some kind of fetish. I didn't feel lost that night with you Draco. I felt happy and that scared me more than anything else. I didn't believe for one second you'd want to see me again. I assumed the best thing to do would be to save us both the embarrassment of you rejecting me and leave. And you didn't owl me after so I figured it was the confirmation that I did the right thing." Hermione sighed, finally looking at him.

"I'm long winded. And dramatic. And a workaholic. I don't have great cleaning habits. I am stubborn and annoying and obsessive. I cry a lot. I like to be busy and I know it's a coping mechanism, but it's one I won't get rid of. I volunteer a lot. I find my purpose in helping others, because it gives me hope for a future where things might be better for my grandchildren. I get an adrenaline rush going towards danger that is probably unhealthy. I take risks because it reminds me of my own mortality and that helps me prioritize my goals."

Draco arched a brow, "Was that supposed to be your list of terrible traits?" He wrinkled his nose. "Fucking Gryffindors."

"You are so set on seeing yourself as a villain, but in my story, seeing everything like this, it makes me think you might be the hero in mine." Hermione sat next to Draco on the couch. "I don't know what I would have done in that warehouse, but I do know that I couldn't do anything useful in that moment because of that potion and you saved my life and I am very grateful to be alive right now because even if I died tomorrow, being able to know how you feel about me, to hear the truth of it all, makes me realize I'd do it all over again if it led me here to you."

Hermione slipped her hands over Draco's as his eyes closed shut, his breathing becoming short and hard.

"Draco." Hermione's tone grew serious, which made him stiffen, his glossy eyes opening quickly. "What is a spell?"

"A series of words repeated imbued with magic or a ritual of some kind, said with specific intention." His brows knit together.

"Do you believe in soulmates?" She could barely whisper, "Not the soul bound kind through the ritual, I mean soul mates as in one person's soul recognizes the other and tries reaching out to them in whatever means possible so they intertwined?"

He just stared at her.

"How often did you repeat my testimony?" Hermione asked softly.

"Dozens of times a day for years. Less now, about a few times of day." Draco's expression had turned guarded.

"What if your repeating the prayer was a form of a spell? What if my repetitive thinking about looking and searching for your name wasn't just coincidence?" Hermione bit her lip.

"Are you saying I forced you to be with me?" The sadness on his face was heartbreaking.

"No. No." Hermione shook her head squeezing his hand. "Draco I think that fate or the universe or whatever power that exists in the world and in our magic kept slowly stitching us together. I think my testimony could have turned into a spell, a chant of some kind, pulling us closer to together. Like every step towards you was there. And even when other people interfered we kept finding each other in small ways. Spinning around in each other. What if the connection in our minds is just another manifestation of what is already happening with our souls."

"Soulmates?" Draco whispered, breathing unsteadily.

"When I was escaping Azkaban, I was preparing to apparate and the only thing I could think about was getting home. Home wasn't my flat but to you. I kept thinking about home and you as one in the same. I could feel you. I could literally feel you on the other side of my apparition. Like tendrils of your strength and magic were waiting for me." Hermione swiped the tear away. "I think I can feel you a lot, actually." Hermione smiled and Draco's jaw clenched hard.

"I know who you are, Draco. I know what you've done. I'm not fooled into thinking you're Harry Potter, because if you were, I wouldn't be so hopelessly in love with you." Draco's jaw trembled. "I don't want someone like myself. I want you. I want all of you. All of your darkness and all of your light. Because despite what you believe about yourself, I see you in your entirety. I see how loyal you are to your friends and family. I see how kind you are. I see how thoughtful you are. I think we balance each other out. You can reel me in when I'm being too risky and I'll push you to be more brave." Hermione slipped her hand against his face. "No more hiding. No more secrets. No more running away. We get to have each other now." She swiped against his tears stained cheek, "I am yours. And Draco you are mine."

Draco's mouth crashed into hers with reckless abandon.

# Chapter 34

## Chapter Notes

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

Draco didn't want to stop kissing Hermione. The plump taste of her lips, her breathy sounds, the feeling of her soft skin against his hands. It all felt like heaven. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to run down the street carrying Hermione shouting that she was his.

Is this what joy felt like? He was unsure he'd ever felt it this intensely. Maybe never at all. Gods above and below, he would never take her for granted.

"I love you," he said, tracing her cheekbone with his thumb. "Thank you."

"For what?" Hermione's voice was soft and sweet.

"I don't know, for existing," he pressed a kiss on the corner of her mouth. "For loving me back. I'm relieved I don't have to figure out how to leave you alone. Or how to live without touching you." His fingers traced the column of her throat. Hermione swallowed and Draco had the strangest urge to bite her. He wanted to taste her blood and be inside her skin and-

"That's sounds very uncomfortable," Hermione giggled.

"I might get myself in trouble now if you can hear the things I think about you." Draco huffed a breath and kissed the pulse point on her neck.

"I don't know, I quite like it. My nosy nature and thirst for knowledge is quite satisfied," she grinned and it made his stomach swoop as if he'd been diving on a broom. She made him want to be a better man.

"Marry me," Draco said.

Her smile faltered for a moment and Draco's courage shrunk.

"Was that a question or a command?" The corner of her mouth quirked up, her eyes locked on his.

"A plea," he replied, "I'm desperately begging you."

"Okay," Hermione said, her smile widened. Draco's heart beat harshly against his chest, borderline painfully, like it might rip into two. "Okay?" he repeated in disbelief.

She brushed her hand against his face. "I mean I'd like a ring. Maybe you should start by asking my ring size?" Hermione's reprimanding voice made Draco grin widely. He grabbed her hand pressing a kiss to her left ring finger. "I already know your ring size." He replied, then his chest tightened with uncertainty. "Say it, darling. Tell me you'll marry me." He kissed her palm.

“I will marry you.” Hermione said. They held each other's stare for a long moment. Until Draco pinned her arm above her head and his mouth found her neck, his teeth scraping against her, nipping along her skin. She squealed trying to squirm away from him. Her laugh was like fire whiskey, he was getting drunk off it. “But only if you beg!” She laughed. Draco kissed her more aggressively laughing along with her.

Harry's voice echoed through the floo slicing like an acid hex through their revelry.  
“Hermione!”

Seconds later Harry stumbled through the fireplace, the grave look to his face had Draco and Hermione shooting up off the couch.

“Listen to me closely,” Harry panted, his eyes darkening. “Hermione you need to go to your room, grab every paper of research you have and any other documents that you need to prove the corruption of the prison. Draco,” Harry shifted towards him, “you need to find any evidence in this house that could link Hermione to Azkaban and anything else that could indicate any crime or any violation of wizarding laws. Collect every thing you can, enhance the security cameras. There are aurors coming to arrest Hermione for treason. They believe she coordinated an attack on the prison. We have less than ten minutes to get her out of here and back to Malfoy manor.”

Hermione stood still for thirty seconds, a calculating look in her eyes before racing away towards her bedroom.

Draco was instantly moving through the living room and kitchen, summoning documents, books, scraps of notes, and the permits she received for visiting his father.

Harry shouted, “Let's leave!”

Hermione scurried to the fireplace, clutching bags full of books and stacks of parchment, shoving a bag of them towards Harry.

“I've worn out the extension charm on my bags. Hold onto those tight.”

Draco grabbed the bags in her arms, “you go first.”

She nodded, and Draco realized she was scared. He could see the determination in her eyes and the fear alongside with it. Is this how she always looked when facing danger? He had been so consumed with his own fear of her life, he didn't realize how much fear she carried too. He had assumed she could logic her way out of the fear, but in reality she held space for both. Hermione stepped through the floo and disappeared.

“What's going on Potter?” Draco shifted towards him.

“I don't know,” Potter breathed harshly. “Something is happening at the DMLE. I don't have many friends there anymore. It's hard to know who to trust or who is pulling the strings. Paperwork was filed to come arrest Hermione. Your mother has already summoned solicitors and I'm sure they're taking every legal measure to protect her. I have to get back there as

soon as possible. There is an emergency ministry wide meeting in half an hour, all departments heads are to be there.”

“Thank you, Potter,” Draco said. “I need you to promise me something.”

“What is it?”

“Things are going to get worse and I’m prepared to fight. I’m prepared to stand beside Hermione every step of the way, but if it comes down to it, I need you to promise me that you’ll choose her. If there is ever a time where you have to choose, you choose her.” Draco’s tone filled with unwavering resolve.

Harry’s face softened, growing solemn. “I understand Malfoy. I promise.”

Draco’s eyes dropped to the floor, his jaw flexing, before her eyes snapped back up to Harry, “Would you vow it?”

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Hermione Granger had set up in one the large studies of Malfoy Manor, a couple hours had past since Harry’s warning to leave her apartment. Hermione needed time to think by herself, so she shut herself in here to sort through all of it. Draco went to his own apartment setting more up surveillance measures, tracking jinxes, and grabbing some of his own belongings. Theo and Pansy had created a list of safe houses around the world, as well as had documents for traveling prepared and ready to use with go bags for all of them, just in case the manor became unsafe.

Hermione had a plan and several back up plans with all sorts of contingencies she could put in place to keep everyone safe. The one thing that kept her most distracted was the text message she’d written and deleted and rewritten to her father. It felt like the war all over again. She wouldn’t obliviate him again, but she needed him to be safe too.

A knock at her door pulled her from her phone. Pansy’s face was pale white, “you’ll want to come listen to this.”

Hermione walked into the sitting room where Blaise paced behind the couches. Theo threw back a glass of fire whiskey as Narcissa sat down on a wingback chair a sad smile on her face to greet her. Draco’s eyes met hers as she approached, sitting beside him, his arm wrapping around her as she did. They sat around a radio, the voice confused and scared as they spoke,

*“Breaking news from the Wizengamot, an emergency meeting took place to vote Ronald Weasley as the current Minister of Magic. According to some claims, Weasley’s campaign had documentation of the corruption that’s spread through the wizarding government. We are now awaiting confirmation as Ron Weasley is about to address the public.”*

*These accusations come just days after an attempted breakout at Azkaban prison. Sources have said an unknown suspect tried to release prisoners for political gain. With so much-er, here is Ronald Weasley now as he emerges from the DMLE.”*

Ron's voice came through the speaker in a fuzzy crackle, “*Hello my fellow wizards and witches. It is with an enormous amount of humility that I stand before you as the interim leader of the wizarding world. As I have said during my campaign, the corruption of our government and society has been escalating for some time now. And in a moment of crisis we need a leader to see us through to the best possible future. Some will say that this should have waited, that a proper election should have happened, but when I saw the evidence I knew I have to take action. I would not let the legacy we've created crumble before my eyes. It is with a heavy heart that my friend and ex-finance Hermione Granger was caught stealing from Azkaban.*” Draco stiffened side her and Hermione didn't know if she was breathing. “*As of today, the Wizengamot and I have created a new government initiative to make sure all wizards and witches are taken care of. This includes the muggleborns, whose magic is unnatural and makes them unstable. The example Miss Granger has just given us is the very reason for my determination and drive. Their nature tends to be unpredictable and unreliable as they don't have the proper understanding of magic.*”

“That fucking lunatic!” Pansy roared.

Ron continued as Hermione's mind raced, “*Once muggleborns are given proper attention and support for their true nature, we will finally reclaim the legacies our forefathers had intended for us. As of today, all muggleborns must register as apprentices of magic. They must be sponsored by a pure blood wizard, the pure blood wizard must be from the approved list of families that have been vetted for their loyalty to wizarding kind.*” Ron's voice turned even darker. “*If you desire to become a wizarding family that will help train the muggleborns properly, please apply. Please show your support and you will be rewarded greatly for your loyalty. And if you are uncertain about what I'm saying just know that Hermione Granger tried to release Lucius Malfoy from Azkaban, luckily we were able to apprehend him before he escaped and we have him in our custody. He will also be trained to have some loyalty.*”

Narcissa choked on a stifled cry into her hands.

“*Every muggle born wizard and witch will need to be registered by December 31st or they'll be jailed in Azkaban. And Hermione, if you're listening please know that I'll be waiting for you to return to your senses. I want to help you, truly I do. That's why your registration has already been completed. I'm your sponsor and I am here to rehabilitate you. Please turn yourself in so you don't have things worse for you. You are mine.*”

Hermione's chest squeeze tight and something inside her chest splintered. Draco's breathing grew shorter. Theo jumped up from his chair. “Fucking maniac.” He hissed running a hand through his hair.

“*And until you're where you belong, the search for you and those who have helped you will not end. Turn yourself in Hermione, and you'll find the safety you desire. You see, I'm a forgiving person and it's time to retire as the war heroine the war is over but in your head it's*

*like you're still fighting battles that don't exist. Unfortunately, Hermione is not of sound mind and hasn't been for a long time, understandable as her muggle parents are seriously unstable as well."*

Hermione broke out in a sob.

*"To my fellow wizard and witches, I appreciate your support and respect the hard work you put into our community. It is because of you we will make the world a better place for all of our children. We will have more announcements in the next coming days. Please send in your ideas to help muggleborns. Please send your ideas and questions to my office. I will be reading every one of them. And to my beautiful fiancé Daphne, you are the best thing to ever happen to me, thank you for believing in my dreams. And a warning to anyone assisting muggleborns will be prosecuted to the furthest extent of the law. Thank you and Tutela Hereditatis!"*

The room was silent save the muffled sobs from half the room. Pansy and Theo held each other as they' sniffled. Narcissa was clutching herself dabbing her eyes. Draco held Hermione tightly against him. Blaise's expression was full of burning anger.

Hermione's own anger was leaping wildly within her, stirring and ready to scream out a war cry.

Her resolve was stronger than ever. It was one thing to target Hermione, but for Ron and The Brotherhood to use her as the scapegoat of their own crimes, proved how cowardly they truly were. It would be their downfall. That she was certain. Hermione would not allow Ron to ruin wizarding society. She would not allow her name to tarnished like this.

She looked around the room, inhaling deeply before saying, "I have a plan." All eyes were on her, but Blaise spoke first.

"Whatever you need Granger, I'm here. I don't need to even hear the plan, because all I know is that cunt Weasley will not get away with this. I'm in on your plan. 100%"

"Me too." Narcissa said full of determination. "There is a bright side though. If Ronald Weasley truly has Lucius in his custody, you best believe Mr. Weasley has heard every sinful thought Lucius has ever had about him." Narcissa smirked, "Hermione you have my complete support and all of my resources at your disposal. The lawyers will be here tomorrow morning."

Harry's voice trickled through the room as he came through the floo. His eyes were bloodshot, he swallowed. "I was just fired from the DMLE."

Theo moved quickly wrapping Harry in a hug. Harry sniffed before turning to face everyone, one arm still around Theo's waist.

"My whole career was thrown away in an instant." Harry's voice was hollow. "Ron is the most power and dangerous man in the Wizarding world right now. He has complete control over the DMLE, the Wizengamot, and Azkaban Prison. " Harry looked at Hermione, "He is about to begin hunting you earnest."

Hermione lifted her chin. "Good, I was planning on that. It's going to make the rest of the plan a lot easier."

Draco stood, waving a wand, and a large whiteboard and cork board appeared, notepads for all of them landed in their laps. His perfect grey eyes went to Hermione, "We're ready darling. Tell us the plan." Hermione's chest swelled. She cleared her throat and stood in front of the white board, grabbing a marker and began writing.

"No one is going to like this," she began. "But," she moved aside as she revealed the words, *Step 1. Hermione gets kidnapped*

"Oh fucking hell." Draco growled.

"Should have seen that one coming." Theo rubbed his face.

*"Fuck Granger." Draco's voice growled in her mind. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"*

*"I gave you a warning."*

*"I thought it was something like, Draco and I are getting married tonight"*

Hermione glared at him. *"I won't get married without my father around. And I don't even have a ring. You can't say things like that without a ring."*

*"I almost called you my fiancé three times already."*

*"Draco, you need to focus."* Hermione huffed. They were all watching them have their silent conversation.

*"If I let you get kidnapped, you have to promise me one thing."* Draco's face grew serious.

*"And what's that?" Hermione watched him carefully.*

*"I'm the one who gets to kill Ron Weasley."*

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for continuing to read and support this fit! I needed a little break, but I'm hoping to be a bit more consistent at uploading going forward, hopefully 1-2x a month.

At some point I'll go through and edit all the typos. lol

I have always wanted to write and this has been the perfect way to practice storytelling. I have an original fantasy story in the works because of how much I've loved writing this fic. Thank you again. You are all so kind and your encouragement has really meant a lot to me.

## Chapter 35

Draco did not like the plan.

Or any of the alternative plans.

Hermione's proposal created several intense debates amongst them. Hermione, to her credit, was very open to new ideas and added them dutifully to her whiteboard. They were still in the midst of deciding on the exact timeline of how things would, hopefully, happen.

Assigning specific roles for each job reinforced the danger of what they were doing. Draco had stayed quiet. He really didn't like the idea of sending his witch straight into the arms of the psychotic monster they've been avoiding for months. It made him want to do something that would truly ruin every relationship in his life. He had too much to loose though.

That realization made his body go cold and hot all at once. *He had a family.* It wasn't just him and his mother. Hermione, Harry, Theo, Pansy, and Blaise had all become so much more than friends. Draco had kept everyone at arm's length for years. Now he had more than he could have ever thought possible and wanted to do everything possible to protect it. He didn't want to hide. That's what kept him seated and quiet and not headed to the DMLE to blow up the entire building or on his way to strangle Ron Weasely.

"So why are you going to Surrey again?" Pansy squinted at the board.

"Hermione and I need to visit her father to set up some security wards." Draco answered.

"And we should have everything else finished and set up to enjoy Christmas morning together." Narcissa added.

Draco looked at Hermione with a wink. Even in the midst of a crisis he couldn't stop thinking of her as his wife. It was the only comfort he could grasp onto.

Hermione's cheeks turned a slight shade of pink as she spoke, turning away from Draco, "We have ten days until New Year's Eve. The next several days will take an immense amount of coordination, planning and preparation. After Christmas the plan will be in motion and once I'm gone, you'll wait for the signal. That's when we begin phase two." Hermione pointed at the board.

"I cannot wait for phase two!" Blaise said with hands held in prayer.

"I want to believe everything will work, but..." Pansy trailed off frowning at the messy timeline on the board. *It was so risky.*

"I agree with Pansy," Harry added, "Let's say you can get into Gringotts undetected, find the vaults, and put everything into place there. Then Hermione gets taken when we want her to and not sooner, and everything does go our way for the first half. And if we all manage to be in the right place at the right time," He gestured to all of them in the room, "We don't have

the same numbers Ron does. We have to assume he has hundreds of people at his disposal now."

"For once Potter and I are on the same page," Pansy said, still frowning. "There are so many variables."

Hermione nodded in agreement, "The truth is we can't predict everything. In fact, it won't go how we hope. I'm certain of that. It's why we have a few back up plans, and truly, the most important task is to get Ron's confession for what exactly is going on. We need him to tell us the details before he's Obliviated or dies." Hermione glanced at Draco. "And I believe Ron's ego is what got him to where he is and it's what will bring his empire toppling down." Hermione turned to the board "And that's where we get to be creative." She tapped her chin, "We could set off an explosion at the DMLE as a distraction or-."

"You are the love of my life." Draco said much more loudly than he intended. Heat flushed Hermione's skin as she looked at him with an embarrassed smile.

"I'm glad to see you two are back on good terms then." Pansy glanced between them.

Hermione turned back to the board. "Draco and I are finally on the same page."

"And we're almost engaged," Draco added with a smile.

Hermione whipped around becoming a new shade of pink and Draco wished he could lick it off her face, he corrected himself, "Engaged to be engaged I should say."

"Draco, do not joke around about such a thing." Narcissa replied with an eye roll.

"It's no joke, I asked Hermione to marry me earlier this evening," Draco grinned, looking only at Hermione. "*Tell them darling. Tell them you're going to be my wife. Please. Please. I'm begging, aren't I?*"

Hermione glared at Draco, "I don't remember being asked *anything*," Hermione replied in a saccharine voice. "And there is no such thing as engaged to be engaged, Sweetheart."

"So you are getting engaged?" Narcissa asked slowly with a smile so wide Hermione just stared at her not wanting to deny it and take away the joy in her eyes.

"That's why we are going to add in a few steps." Draco stood and Hermione folded her arms. He winked at her as he took the marker from her.

"*I know what you're trying to do,*" Hermione said into Draco's mind.

"*I'm improving your plan.*"

"*You're planning our wedding.*"

"*You just sound redundant now, darling .*"

Draco added a few of his own ideas to the board and in large bold words wrote, *Wedding Day!*

Blaise let out a low whistle.

"I like it," Harry grinned.

"Me too," Theo chuckled.

"As if the next few days aren't going to be busy enough, now I'm going to be planning a wedding?" Pansy gaped and then nodded vigorously, "I accept the challenge."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to talk about a wedding before I'm engaged. Tomorrow I'll be spending the day preparing potions and setting up supplies." Hermione said erasing Draco's words with her wand. "I'll have a detailed list of assignments by tomorrow evening."

Hermione paused, blinking rapidly. "I'm going to spend all day preparing potions," she repeated. Draco stepped closer to her.

"I'm going to spend all day preparing potions." Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and she clutched her head.

"Hermione," Draco grabbed her waist, steadyng her.

"Oh Merlin." Hermione whined, tears in her eyes, "Draco I-I..."

"What is it?" Draco held a hand to her face.

"I did it," she whispered, brows furrowed and lip quivering. "I...obliviated...myself."

~~~~~

"Draco, I need you to replace the memories from your obliviation." Hermione said, frantically pacing.

They had rushed to their room to be alone. Hermione considered the implications of what she remembered. She pulled on her hair, willing herself to remember more. The picture of Ron's face about to obviate her meshed with another memory of her own trembling hand, wand pointed to her head. It was two distinct memories. She knew that, but she didn't understand how they were connected.

“Fuck.” She snapped. Ron had crossed a line that she could never forgive. Not that she would forgive him for taking over the wizarding world, but damn this was so violating. What he done to her? What had *forced* her to do? Her stomach flipped violently. Oh she was going to be sick.

“Hermione,” Draco was shaking his head.

“I need you to do it.” Hermione said firmly, stopping to face him. “I would have only obliviated myself for one reason and one reason alone. I must have created something awful. Something so wrong that I didn’t want to remember it. When I created my potions textbooks I went to Hogwarts and spoke with Snape about the ethics of potions. I wanted to hear his honest thoughts about where to draw the line. What boundaries would he be okay pushing under certain circumstances. He told me his biggest regret was not erasing the *sectumsempra* curse from his textbook. And that if there was ever a spell, potion, or magical concoction I created I should erase it from memory. I don’t think I would have done it if it wasn’t something crossing my ethical boundaries.” She paced again, her mind going through all the scenarios that would force her to do it. Had it been a curse? A hex? “And I think, maybe if you give me the memories from that night in the warehouse, it could trigger a counter reaction, it could help me remember when I’ve been obliviated before. My mind wants to help me, it’s right there. I don’t even know why I was there that night Draco. I need to know why I was in that warehouse.”

“I don’t trust myself.” Draco blurted, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t want to be responsible for harming your mind.”

“I don’t care if you don’t trust yourself, you are the only person *I* trust,” she pointed to herself, “And because it’s my brain. I get to be the one to decide. Please, Draco.” Hermione pleaded.

He looked at the floor, exhaling a deep breath. “Fine.”

“Right now.” Hermione stepped towards him and his head snapped up. Hermione nodded with determination. “I need to know right now.”

Draco’s jaw hardened and he lifted his wand. “Stay still.”

Hermione was transported to the flat she formerly shared with Ron and the memory unfurled inside her mind.

“Mione?” Ron said as he entered her office with a soft knock and her morning tea. “Rose based, herbal mixture with a touch of nutmeg this time.” He grinned at her and her stomach tumbled with excitement.

“You spoil me.” Hermione stopped writing in her notepad and grabbed for the tea.

“Go on, tell me how it tastes, babe.” He grinned wider. Ron had suddenly become a tea connoisseur the last few weeks. Trying different flavor profiles and steeping techniques.

They'd been fighting so much recently, but one day he brought her a tea cup with a note. *I'm so sorry, I'm going to be better for you.* He really had held his temper. He was trying.

The herbal tea tasted different. Familiar somehow but not unpleasant. She smacked her lips trying to place the minty notes. "I like it. Have I had this before?"

"Not this combination, no." He sat next to her workbench. "What are you working on today?"

"Oh Azkaban stuff. I had to postpone so much work." Hermione chuckled, "I'll be preparing potions all day tomorrow, but I think it's worth it."

"What is the latest project? I thought you were going to slow down and give yourself a break." He gripped onto her shoulders massaging them.

"I know. I know. I just... I've been reading more about the history of Azkaban and I couldn't stop wondering why nothing has changed about it. Are we really that far behind the times that just because we've sent the dementors away that everything is fine? I've already gotten my approval from my publisher to write about it, but there is so much to dig into and the-"

Ron frowned, "Hermione this is too much for you. We need to go on a vacation."

"A vacation?"

"Yeah, maybe you need time away from the city to just relax and experiment on the potions you said you wanted to test?" Ron leaned in brushing a stray curl away from her face.

"I guess that would be nice." She sighed while drinking more tea.

"Hermione!" Pansy's voice made Ron flinch and roll his eyes.

"I thought I told you she needed to give us some warning before a floo call?" Ron grumbled, "Can't she just owl you? I don't like her bothering you all the time."

"Ron she's my publicist and I'm about to publish a new book soon, I have to talk to her pretty much all the time." Hermione chuckled.

"It's just too much, Hermione. You read too much, you're too picky, you work too much, you're volunteering every weekend. And I-"

Hermione's eyes began to water, "Ron I don't want to argue about this anymore. I need to talk to Pansy, we're setting up my book tour in the Fall." She stood and headed towards the door.

"Yeah well pencil in a vacation for this weekend. Actually let's just leave tomorrow. Please? I'm so stressed right now, Hermione. I really need time to be with you."

The look in his eyes was full of desperation and it pulled on her heart strings. "Okay. okay. We can go away for the weekend." She conceded. He'd been putting in so much effort for her.

"Maybe more than that, like a two weeks? I don't know maybe a month?" Ron shrugged and Hermione furrowed her brow. "Ron that's ridiculous. I'll tell her we're taking a break until Monday, tomorrow's Wednesday, and that gives us five long days to relax and set some goals for the future." She smiled at him but he didn't smile back and something inside her twisted. The same feeling she got when she felt like she was forgetting something.

"Hermione, I know you're home!" Pansy called again.

"I'll go to Pansy's and I'll only be gone for an hour. Then I'll come straight back and we'll plan the trip."

"Yeah, alright." Ron sighed. "Just tell them not to bother you at all while we're gone."

Hermione's memory swirled, her crying with Pansy's arm wrapped around her.

"I don't know Pans, I just love him." Hermione swiped at the tears. "I felt like life was finally getting better, like *I* was finally getting better."

"You are not broken Hermione." Pansy squeezed her. "You don't think him whisking you away on a vacation is like love bombing you after all the arguments you've had? it's not that I'm against a vacation, but you've been overwhelmed and forgetful."

"No, we've been discussing it for a while. He's wanted to take me away a few times and work always gets in the way. He works a lot and I work a lot and he's really trying this time. I don't know. I think I have to try." Hermione stood. "I have to go though. I told him I'd only be gone an hour and I've already pushed the limit."

"He shouldn't get mad at you for being with your friends, he already restricts us from seeing you as it is."

"He's not restricting me, I have responsibilities and I really need to prioritize him. I really have been ignoring him. My hyper-fixations can get out of hand. Don't you remember how I didn't leave my office for like a week straight when I was writing that romance novel? That's how it's been lately for me. I've been experimenting with potions too, Ron's actually been encouraging me to go outside my comfort zone and he's building my confidence about it."

"You don't have to sell me on your boyfriend, Hermione. I want to be happy for you, but..."

"I know. I'm not trying to be defensive. I'm sorry. I have to go. I'll message you as soon as I get back."

Hermione was pulled again through a swirl of memory,

"Ron, why are we here?" Hermione looked at the warehouse in front of her. It looked muggle in nature, hardly any magic buzzing off it.

"Work stuff, just need to grab a few things before we head out. And I wanted to get your opinion on a potion I might invest in." Hermione became intrigued.

They walked through the long corridors, security guards nodding at Ron.

“I didn’t know you worked here.”

“Yeah, well you don’t ask much about my job these days.” He snapped and turned sharply into an industrial style potion workroom, pulling her inside. It was empty, but held at least a dozen cauldrons set up to brew. They walked over to the countertop and Ron grabbed a lengthy potion formula. “This formula isn’t working like it was originally supposed to, something is off and I need you to figure it out.”

“Ron, why are you so upset?” Hermione reached for his face, “What is going on?”

Ron sighed heavily through his nose, “What’s wrong is that I’m really stressed because I took out a loan from a business associate to pay for the amount of ingredients necessary for this potion to work. You told me that it would work, Hermione. It’s not working, so really I need you to figure out what’s wrong with it.” There was an edge to his words she didn’t like.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hermione shook her head, “When did I give you a potion to make?”

Ron’s face grew tight, “Just fucking read the formula Hermione.”

She stilled, conflicting feelings swirling through her. She loved him. She loved Ron.

“Okay. Okay.” She said, trying to diffuse the situation, grabbing for the parchment, she sat down at the worktable and began to read. It was advanced work, complex combinations, strict stirring routines, rare ingredients. “Making this a commercial potion is a lot of work. Not anyone is going to be able to make this, Ron. It would take several advanced practitioners.” Hermione bit her lip, trying to understand the combination of ingredients. It was as if they’d taken amortentia and combined it with some fear inducing spell, but that didn’t make any sense. “What is this for?”

“Loyalty, Hemrione. It’s a potion you created. You told me if they followed the instructions exactly, they could make it. Are you telling me now that they can’t?” He spit.

“Who is making a loyalty potion?” Hermione shook her head, “Who in their right mind would want to make one?”

“My workers are making it!” He snapped. “I have a pickup for the potion planned for very early Saturday morning and I need a decent supply to show the efforts of my investments.”

Hermione read over the ingredients and swallowed, speaking slowly, “Ron this is a very dangerous potion.” She held back what else she wanted to say. There is no way she’d tell him to commercially produce such a thing. It was ludacris. The ethical boundaries of such a thing were horrific. “Not to mention you’d need to test this before putting it out publicly.”

Ron stared at her breathing slow controlled breaths. “Alright, let’s just fucking start over I can’t handle this shit.” He lifted his wand so fast Hermione never saw it coming, “Obliviate.”

“Ron?” Hermione blinked at him.

"Hi." Ron grinned, "Hi babe." He rubbed her head affectionately. "You were just telling me how excited you were to make this potion and you slipped and bumped your head. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah I'm feeling fine," Hermione exhaled.

"Good. Okay. Drink this tea. It'll make you feel much better." He handed her a steaming cup of tea. She drank it and it relaxed her. Ron was so handsome. She was so in love with him.

"This potion is your passion project." Ron said, "I'm here to help you fulfill your dreams, Hermione, we rented this commercial potion's lab for you to experiment as you please. I spoil you. So you'll make this potion until you have several batches completed. Okay?"

"Yeah, that sounds fun." Hermione looked around the room blinking. "I'll get started right away."

"Thank fuck." Ron cracked his neck. "I'll come check on you in a few hours. I have some things to figure out."

Time moved quickly as Hermione saw herself making batches of potions, working herself down to the bone. She could practically feel the pain in her feet and the ache in her head. Two days went by before Hermione began questioning what she was doing again. Ron had only visited once.

Hermione poked her head out of the door, to find two security guards a few feet away.

"Hey, have you seen Ron?" Her voice trembled, she was confused and hungry and tired.

"No, he's busy right now." One of the guards said, "You should just get back to work, sugar." An icy sensation wound down her spine. "I think I'd like to go home now." Hermione began to step forward and the guards stepped towards with their hands on their wands. "That's not going to happen." The other guard said. Hermione felt sheer terror as she realized she was trapped. Fuck. Was Ron okay? Had they hurt him? Why did he leave her?

"Oh okay." She smiled demurely. "Can I just use the restroom? It's that time of the month and all." The men grimaced. "Yeah down the hall to your left." They looked at her for a long moment, "We'll walk you."

"Alright." Hermione nodded. They walked behind her and in front of her and she closed her eyes and attempted to apparate. *Nothing*. Fuck. Anti apparition wards. She couldn't feel them though. Or maybe they were simply keyed only to not let *her* out. *Ron what have you got yourself into*. Okay. She needed to find a new way out. She couldn't risk attacking them, she was tired and wasn't sure she could take two guards at once and they might have backup somewhere close by. She also didn't even know where she was. Her throat tightened painfully.

“What is that?” Hermione gasped loudly, stopping both guards in their tracks. They both stopped wands out. Then she yelled putting as much fear into her voice as possible, “I think I saw someone!” She pointed the opposite direction and the guards looked at each other. One of them tapped their wand three times and a screen of the premises became visible. And to Hermione’s actual surprise, there was someone here. A video of someone walking around the back of the building just a few minutes prior.

“Fuck.” one of them grunted. “Looks like the wards are down too.” Hermione’s eyes went wide as they took off and she immediately began to run the opposite direction.

“Go back and get her, you idiot!” One of them yelled. Hermione’s heart pounded. She took another left, and then she grabbed a hold of a handle and flung it open skidding across a slippery floor and crashing into a pallet of glass bottles.

When Hermione opened her eyes, hot rage filled her veins so intensely she felt feral. “What do I have to do for you to let me kill Ron Weasley?”

And Draco grinned menacingly, reminding her of a wolf again, “Let’s make it a competition darling.”

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Because everyone keeps referring to this fic as a rollercoaster... *clears throat and grabs microphone*

Alright, keep hands arms, legs, and feet inside the ride at all times.
Remain seated until the ride comes to a complete stop. It might even be a good idea to wear a helmet.

Thank you and enjoy your ride.

5-4-3-2-1

See you on the other side!!

Chapter Notes

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

2 days later. Dec 22nd

Ron Weasley sipped a rare aged fire-whisky as he reread the letter in front of him, he frowned deeper with every line.

Ron,

I can't escape Draco. He's gone mad. He wants to take me far away from you.

I've tried to turn myself in, but he won't let me go. I want to talk to you.

I'll tell you everything I was doing in Azkaban, but I need your help.

Draco will hunt me down with every resource he has. Ron, please help me. I know things have been strange between us, but there are things I've discovered about Draco that I can't write about in this letter. It terrifies me that he might take me far away from here. Call off the witch hunts for me so I can find a way safely to you. Or better yet, send someone for me. Send people you trust, send the strongest you have because you cannot underestimate Draco. My time is running out.

yours,

Hermione

“You don’t believe it, do you?” Daphne huffed from across her desk. “They’re planning something. It’s too easy.” She drew out the word, and it irritated him.

“I’m not stupid, you know,” Ron replied, setting down his drink. He leaned forward in his chair, “We need Hermione back though. The side effects are becoming uncontrollable, and if we can’t control them, things will not go as planned. We can’t keep having rogue loyalists go batty like that prison guard and that Hogwart’s student.”

“So?” Daphne said contemplatively, lifting her wine glass. “We bring her here, use her as bait, and kill the others?”

“Maybe.” Ron glanced back at the letter.

Something squeezed in his chest. Hermione was right about one thing, she was his. She had always been his, dammit, and he wouldn’t lose her again. He deserved the fruits of her mind and he deserved to be in control of her. *He* deserved to own her in a contract. Fucking Malfoy pretended to be some hero, Hermione was convinced he had good intentions, and now here is he making a mess of things. All these fucking years he spent building a future for her, only to be tossed aside for a bloody death eater. Draco would pay for it. Severely. Meanwhile, Ron had only tried to help her become the most brilliant witch alive. Obsession seemed dramatic, but it did feel compulsory to need Hermione back. With her potion skills and his leadership, they could rule the world. He wasn’t exactly in love with her; no love was such a simple word. He loved Daphne, but if she crossed him, that wouldn’t stop him from tossing her aside and finding someone as loyal as he deserved. And it was time for him to get what he deserved. All of it. He already had the sexiest fiancée he could imagine, Hermione would become his little pet, and soon he’d have all the power someone like him should have. Everything in his life was near perfect now.

“Killing them is just so easy,” Ron said, imagining how much he’d enjoy hearing Draco scream and beg for his mercy. Killing Draco was enticing, but drawing out his torture? His agony? Making him watch Hermione suck Ron off? Marry him? Now that sounded like a blast. “It’s much more fun to play with them. Haven’t you had so much fun the last few months?”

He glanced back up at his fiancée.

“Yes, yes, I have,” Daphne laughed. Her smile was so sexy. Gods he was such a lucky wizard.

Ron let his mind wander at all the possible scenarios Hermione would attempt. Hermione would need to prove her loyalty before he’d believe anything in this letter.

“Bring Hermione in and let her rot somewhere for a while,” Ron said, tossing the letter into the fire. “If we catch any of the other strays, take them in, but don’t go out of your way. I

don't want to expend any unnecessary power yet. If she comes, Harry will be desperate to play the hero. He'll try to rescue her. I want his house guarded around the clock and wards reinforced every three hours. After getting Hermione, go to her flat. Take everything."

"Everything?" Daphne wrinkled her nose and pouted. He needed those lips of hers on his cock.

"Yes, everything. You never know what you'll find useful until the right moment. And if she cooperates, which eventually she will, she'll need her things. I don't want to buy her new clothes or make her think she's above you in any way. She'll become my second wife at some point, but you are always my number one, my queen." He lifted his drink towards her.

Daphne grinned, "And if we get Draco?" she arched a brow.

Ron smirked, "Do with him what you wish."

Daphne sighed contentedly. "I'm thrilled for the future Ronald, absolutely thrilled. Wait." She sat up straighter. "Does this mean it's finally my turn to play Draco? Goldstein's done it. McLaggen's done it. It's never been me before and I'm so jealous." Daphne's bottom lip, still lightly wet from wine, popped out again. *Those lips.* Godsdamnit.

"Sure," Ron smirked. "But do not hurt Hermione." Daphne continued pouting. "Fine, don't hurt her *physically*."

Her smile returned and he leaned back in his chair. "Now, get over here and show me how much you love me."

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## 5 days later Dec 27th

Hermione sped down the streets of Diagon Alley as Draco barreled after her.

"Hermione!" Draco roared from behind her and her heart squeezed as she tore her gaze away from him. Thanks to Ron's city-wide curfew, no one was outside as the dusky sky shifted into night.

She hated to leave him this way, but all's fair in love and war. He was gaining on her and she apparated a block ahead, narrowly turning a corner. Fresh adrenaline pumped through her at the sight of the wizards down the street. There were a dozen of them standing guard behind Anthony Goldstein, Cormac McLaggen, and another Draco Malfoy. All of their wands were drawn defensively. The sight of Draco there with them made her run faster.

"Hermione!" Draco's voice echoed violently off the building's walls. She was almost there when an acid hex flew past her head.

*Shit, he wasn't playing around.*

Hermione skidded to a halt, ducking behind a shrub, barely able to catch her breath.

A killing curse swirled through the sky. *Draco, for fuck's sake! Do you want me dead?*

No response came.

She couldn't recall a single moment he'd ever ignored her before this. The last seven days had been so busy that they'd hardly agreed on anything.

Anthony Goldstein stepped forward, deflecting Draco's spells, and signaled for Hermione to move behind the wards.

"Thank you, Anthony!" she yelped desperately as she ran behind him to safety.

Another curse slammed into the wards right where she had just entered.

"Go after him!" the Draco next to Hermione yelled. Anthony charged forward with half of the men. Hermione turned away, afraid to see the outcome of their dark magic duel.

"We should leave," Hermione said urgently facing McLaggen, "I don't want to risk being here and facing his wrath if he gets through the wards." He did not offer his usual wink, but instead, gripped her arm tightly. The other Draco watched the chaos in the streets, a maniacal smile on his lips. Hexes and killing curses flew through the streets and pieces of asphalt erupted dangerously through the air.

"Should I take her in, boss?" McLaggen asked the other Draco just as the wards in front of them broke apart with a cracking snap.

Hermione gasped and McLaggen shoved Hermione behind him stepping forward, the other Draco whipped out his wand trying and failing to rebuild the wards.

The other guards spread around them flinging out curses and protective spells.

Hermione shrieked, whipping her wand out to deflect a spell.

"Give me that wand!" The Draco next to her snapped, right as a confundo curse struck his head.

McLaggen jerked his head backward at Draco's slumped body. "Shit."

"We need to get out of here!" Hermione screamed.

"Okay," McLaggen nodded. He barked out an order, "Get him in custody and bring him to the king!" There were several acknowledging cheers in response, "For the king! Tutela Hereditidas!"

She'd lost sight of her Draco in the group of guards as they began to corner him near a dead end. McLaggen grabbed hold of Hermione and the barely functioning Draco beside them, apparating away from the chaos.

Hermione landed on a grassy field, barely able to orient herself before a sack was placed over her head and her wand was yanked away. Rough hands searched her body for weapons, then her hands were tightly bound.

Imposter Draco hissed at McLaggen, “Get your ass back over there with Goldstein. Ron is not going to be happy I was hurt. You’ll pay for it, I’ll be certain of it. Bring Draco back or else!”

Then, without warning, Hermione was apparating again, much more violently this time.

As soon as they landed, Hermione was shoved forward against the stone floor, her knees cracking. A bursting sharp pain emanated through her bones and Hermione fell forward, barely catching herself with her bound wrists. Her elbows slammed against the hard floor sending another deafening, cracking sensation through her body.

“You cursed me, you bitch!” Daphne Greengrass screamed at her before ripping off the bag around her head. They were in some kind of dungeon. The room had stone walls and held no windows. Part of the room was enclosed like a prison cell.

Hermione shook her head, “I didn’t-”

“You liar!” Daphne grabbed Hermione by the hair, yanking her onto her knees, their faces an inch apart, “Don’t think for one second anyone wants you here.” Daphne’s spit flew against Hermione’s face. “Your only redeeming quality is that brain of yours. And Ron specifically told me he wants you to rot. So that’s what you’ll do. Rot away while we find all your friends. And once we find them they’ll wish they had never been associated with a muggle born like you. Filthy and unfit to be a witch.”

A small huff of laughter came from somewhere in the room, sending a chill down Hermione’s spine.

Hermione grinned. “Next time you’re with Ron, remember, I had him first.”

Daphne’s lips twisted into a haughty smirk, “If you think he was faithful to you, you are sorely mistaken. He was extremely unsatisfied with you.” Hermione held Daphne’s wild stare, “Or maybe, he’s bringing me back around because he’s unsatisfied with you.”

Daphne struck her, jerking Hermione’s head violently sideways. The stinging wave of pain rippled through her face.

“That’s all you got?” Hermione let out a hoarse laugh, “weak.” Hermione’s eyes watered and she gritted her teeth, tasting blood.

Daphne inhaled sharply, eyes wide, and shoved Hermione to the floor. Hermione fell onto the side as Daphne straightened to her full height, “You listen here you little skank. You don’t deserve either of them, but I promise you, when we get our hands on Draco, His loyalty is going to be me and me alone. He’ll never even think of you again. He’ll forget all about you, you little mudblood bitch.”

“How long have you replayed your little tryst with him, Daphne?” Hermione’s grin was feral, “Is that what’s kept you so desperate? Wishing that your one little night actually meant something to him?”

Daphne’s jaw clenched and her eyes flashed with rage, “I should have released those pictures of you. The whole world should know what kind of wh—”

“Or is it that I got to be with him more than once that pisses you off?”

“You are nothing! Nothing!” Daphne shrieked, ricocheting off the cold walls, “Crucio!”

The curse was instantaneous and all-consuming. Hermione’s back arched as overwhelming pain erupted through her body in searing waves. It felt like knives were slicing her muscles away from her bones, an excruciating agony. She could hear nothing over her screams.

Her vision began to disappear as her body twisted at odd angles.

Every breath she took intensified the wretched pain.

Daphne’s menacing smile was the last thing Hermione saw.

## Chapter End Notes

I never expected this story to mean so much to me, but it has been such a fun hobby and creative exercise. I want to say a huge thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting on this. I started writing it when I was depressed as a way to help me have something to look forward to. So thank you for letting me flex my creative wings and for all the hits of dopamine your comments bring.

## Chapter 37

Hermione let out a stifled cry as she attempted to stretch her legs. Her body cramped painfully as she forced her limbs to move. It felt like trying to bend metal pipes with her bare hands. The clanking sound of her shackles echoed off the stone walls, causing her to flinch. A sharp ringing reverberated through her ears, as she pushed herself upright. Luckily, some parts of her were less sore than others; her arms at least, were less stiff than the rest of her body.

As her vision focused, she found herself directly across from Lucius Malfoy. Had she been sent to Azkaban, or was she hallucinating?

Lucius' menacing eyes watch her struggle to sit upright. His greasy hair was matted partially to his scalp and his body was mottled with a variety of colored bruises. His arms rested against propped-up knees, in a dirty, threadbare Azkaban uniform. Like Hermione, he wore shackles around his ankles and wrists, attached to long chains that connected to the wall behind him.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," Lucius said, frowning.

"Thank you." Hermione smiled, though it was more of a grimace as the stiff muscles of her jaw cramped. She ran a hand over her mouth, gently massaging the area.

"I guess this is the honeymoon of your dreams, isn't it, you little fluffernutter? Attempting to be the brave heroine," he said unimpressed, "I'm sorry I don't have a proper wedding gift, dear daughter-in-law. I've been too busy being beaten for information. Is your book out yet? I'd love to read how you saved all of us in Azkaban. Or did your grand plan not go how you hoped?" He pouted, mockingly. "I can't tell. Did it include being caught and tortured?"

Hermione exhaled slowly, as she sat up straight. "I'll take a rain check on the gift, don't worry."

Disgust spread through his features. "Where is Narcissa?"

An icy spear sliced through her chest. "I don't know where anyone is." She didn't want to know anyone's location. It's why she locked herself in the potion's lab at Malfoy Manor all day. "The others will show up when it's time, hopefully." There was utter repulsion in his eyes.

"Hope?" Lucius spat, "That's what you're basing your plan on?"

Hermione slowly removed the laces of her boot. Hissing as she slid off her shoe, revealing a very swollen foot. "Isn't that what you based yours on? The hope Voldemort would conquer Harry?" Lucius gave a small flinch at Voldemort's name.

"My plan didn't include encountering you first though." She worked her other shoe off, relishing in the small relief it brought her body. "I only need one thing from you. It shouldn't

be very difficult.” Hermione relayed his task.

Lucius just stared at her before nodding in agreement, then added, “If Narcissa is harmed because of your stupidity, I will kill you.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Hermione replied with an eye-roll, her breathing was labored from all the movement. Everything ached. “You know you’re not as intimidating as you think you are, dear father-in-law.” she mocked while leaning back against the wall and closing her eyes.

“Why are you in here?” Hermione asked after several moments of silence. “I’ve heard they have resources that can stop you from being rebellious.”

“I seem to be miraculously immune to whatever concoction they’ve brewed.” He said, staring hard at her.

“Immune?” Hermione’s eyes snapped open and her mind raced with possibilities. She needed her eyes on that damn potion’s ingredients again. “Oh, and one more thing.” She threw her shoe at him. *Hard.* “Catch,” Hermione added after it hit him in the shoulder.

He grunted and chucked the shoe back at her, but she ducked missing the hit. A move she instantly regretted as her back cramped, forcing her to curl inward.

Before she could hit him again, Anthony Goldstein strolled into the dungeon, whistling a familiar tune. Hermione glared at him, as he approached the cell. Lucius shot up, “Get me out of here!” He snarled, “I don’t want to be here with her! The fluffernutter has taken everything from me! The damned fluffernutter has taken my son! She tricked him! She took away my family! She’s cursed them. Took away my estate! She drained my power!”

Anthony smiled, slipping his hands in his pockets, “You can’t be that afraid of a little old Hermione can you?”

“I need to speak to Ron,” Hermione said as firmly as she could. “Tell him Daphne can’t be trusted!”

Anthony chuckled, “Right, our future Queen is untrustworthy and you are.”

“Queen?” Hermione frowned.

“You’ll see soon, but for now? You’ll stay here and you’ll stay quiet.” His smile disappeared, “Or I’ll accidentally leave the keys to this room with Daphne.”

“Move me back to the lab!” Lucius demanded shaking on the bars of the cell. “Take me away from here!”

Anthony smiled again, haughty and confident, “Oh we will soon.”

Goldstein turned to Hermione, “And we caught him you know. His little trick didn’t work on us, did you two plan that?” He tilted his head towards Hermione, “Did you think having three Dracos would confuse us? We know about his secret tattoos.” He sang the words.

Hermione's throat ached, from the Crucio or from the threat of crying she didn't know, "I didn't know about his plan. Who was with him?"

Anthony licked his lip, "Ginny Weasely and Neville Longbottom, never cared for either of them," he shrugged. "But soon they'll fall in line. Ron's not ready to see you, because you don't deserve to be in his presence yet."

"Tell him I have information he'll want to know." Hermione stammered as Goldstein made his way towards the door.

"Oh yeah? Like what?" He sneered, arching a brow.

"I'll only tell Ron. He's the only one I trust." Hermione accidentally clenched her teeth and an echo of the Crucio pain drove through her, fraying the nerves of her teeth. She clutched her jaw as pain shot down her neck and spine. "Please." She said. "Please, please, please."

Anthony's gaze hardened, "You're gonna need to prove your loyalty if you want to be on Ron's good side."

"What about me?" Lucius yelled, "Get me out of here!"

"Nah, I think being scared will do you some good. Perhaps you'll be willing to finally be generous." Anthony emphasized.

"I'll help you get you into the Malfoy vaults!" Hermione offered.

"You little thief!" Lucius snapped, "How dare you! You'll have none of my money!"

"Draco took me there," Hermione nodded, "I can take you there. I can tell you the passwords."

"You traitor!" Lucius said.

Anthony just watched her, "I'll relay the information. Until then try not to kill each other."

When the door slammed, water and a meager amount of food appeared before them. Lucius was seething, glaring daggers into her as he padded to his corner of the cell.

He downed his water and attempted to throw the cup at her, but it disappeared into thin air. Hermione knew her strength was important to maintain, but before she grabbed the food, she whispered a Revelio charm. Her wandless magic would help her avoid any poisoned food.

But nothing happened. No buzz of magic, no surge of energy, nothing.

She blinked, trying again louder this time. Her wandless magic was stronger than most, she'd built the skill tirelessly. But even when it didn't work, even when her wand wasn't near, she could always *feel* her magic.

Lucius threw his head back in a howling cackle.

She repeated the charm, willing her magic to work, her breathing becoming harsh.

Lucius wiped tears from his eyes, as another fit of laughter barreled through him.

Her magic was gone.

## Chapter 38

Hermione forced small breathes through her nose as panic roared through her. Her body ached and her chest tightened so painfully that she pressed both hands against it, but the counter-pressure did little to ease the ache.

Lucius grinned wickedly, “What did you think they were going to do, give you a wand after torturing you?”

Hermione’s mind raced with everything she knew. She’d created a loyalty potion and Obliviated herself. She made the original potion, which forced Ron to create other batches that were less effective. She could only assume he was testing it on prisoners and brotherhood members, using it to get secrets and force loyalty for his charge against muggle-borns. Her mind was valuable to them, but so was her magic. They couldn’t take away her magic permanently if they needed it.

Something about this room was off. Holding the bars tightly, ignoring the scream of her muscles as stood, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim room. The stone floor, the lack of windows. And as if all at once she could see it, the small etchings amongst them. The ancient runes carved in spiral patterns looked like designs, but it was magic binding.

She was an idiot. Of course, they could pull off a binding spell, they had fucking runic stones. They stole the third one from them, they probably had more. If she had answers she could figure this out. They needed to find where they were keeping the stones, that would be the advantage.

Lucius eye’s dragged down her shaking muscles and she sat down again. “She crucio’ed you for a long time.” He said irritated, but the bit of concern in his voice caught Hermione’s attention.

“Do you care that I was harmed?” Hermione asked, her mind whirled once again and something nagged in her mind. That bitter concern laced with resentment in his voice was not unfamiliar.

“I need you to be alive to save my wife.” Lucius spat.

“Hmmm.” Hermione considered his answer. “Would you be sad if I died, Lucius?”  
Hermione’s mouth tugged.

His eyes narrowed, “I would be a lot of things. Sad for my son’s pathetic sorrow, but also I’d feel joy and-”

Hermione laughed, loudly. It made him clamp his mouth shut before screaming, “I need out of here!”

“You’re not immune to the potion at all!” This was the best thing she could have ever imagined.

“Oh thank you merlin,” Hermione sighed. “Tell me, when did you realize that the potion made you loyal to me.”

“I just want my wife to live.” He spat.

“I’m sore,” Hermione said, in a commanding tone.

Lucius’s jaw tightened.

“Did you happen to massage my arms while I was unconscious?” Hermione’s forearms were the only part of her that didn’t ache, didn’t even twitch as much the other parts of her. They felt cared for in a way only another person could offer. She could test her theory about the potions in real-time. Giving her a head start to creating an antidote. This was the advantage she didn’t know she needed.

“You need to be alive to save my wife,” Lucius stated.

“Is my existence the only thing that matters to you?”

He just stared at her.

“Which questions does it force you to answer? Does it work like Truth serum? I vaguely remember those ingredients amongst them, but loyalty... you’d need something binding to them.... Something either to fear... or hate.” Hermione replied a wide grin on her face. “It is hate that binds you to me?”

Lucius's whole face was shaking, he couldn't look away she realized. As long as she kept eye contact, there was a stronger connection there somehow. Fascinating. Horrifying, but so very fascinating. “For an awful potion this makes me feel quite powerful,” Hermione whispered. Then said, “I’m in pain.”

Lucius clenched his eyes shut, but when they shot open he stood, moved towards her, grabbed her leg, and began massaging her calf muscle.

Hermione observed him as he switched legs, kneading her calf muscles just as long as necessary to relieve a little pain. As soon as he determined he was done, he moved to the corner of cell.

“I’m in more pain.” She repeated right as he sat down. Lucius snarled, “You’re a little lying fluffernutter!” But he stood again, moving towards her.

“Is it my pain that disturbs you?” Hermione said as he sat in front of her once more. “Don’t touch me, I’m in pain because you have answers I don’t have, ease my pain with your information.” He smelled awful, of sweat and grime and dried blood. “The more you tell me

the easier it will be to create an antidote, and if you're kind to me, I'll still keep our bargain from Azkaban. Perhaps you'll live to see my manor again."

"I hate you." He spat, but the venom wasn't there. The feeling of telling him what to do, however, was quite powerful, addictive even. Hermione was surprised at the writhing flare of power inside her, tempting her to make him jump like a trained dog.

"When did you realize you were being drugged?" She asked.

"I was told I was immune, but I realized shortly after your visit earlier this year." He replied.

"And they keep giving it to you, but it hasn't changed where your loyalties lie, can you manipulate it?" Hermione said,

"I haven't been able to disregard your pain, but," He inhaled sharply, "It doesn't make you more of a prioritization than myself to some extent, self-preservation still exists, nor does it put you ahead of my wife." Hermione considered this for a long time and Lucius got tired of her, moving back to his corner with a grunting sneer. She mostly wondered if it was possible to change his hatred. Did he truly hate her? Or was it the compassion that was so foreign to him that made him uncomfortable?

Hermione's mind swam with possibilities as exhaustion set in. She laid on the floor and closed her eyes, enjoying the fact that her muscles did feel better. Lucius Malfoy was loyal to her, she liked it. She liked the feeling of it and she was absolutely certain that is why she obliterated herself.

It was three days before anyone came in. Anthony Goldstein swung the door open with a loud crack making both Lucius and Hermione jolt. Hermione left Lucius alone for the most part, sometimes she liked teasing him about the potion, but mostly she hated that Ginny and Neville were in here somewhere risking their lives for this to work.

She leapt up, "I want to see Ron."

Goldstein frowned, "What's your obsession with him?"

"I need to speak to him to fix things. Where is Neville and Ginny?"

"You're quite a demanding little thing aren't you?" He smirked at her, "I like it."

Hermione grimaced, "You're disgusting."

"If you want an ally here," His eyes washed over her body and she was overly aware how dirty she was. "I'm your best bet. You should be kinder to me."

Her eyes narrowed on him, "Then will you please let me take a shower?"

"Yes," Goldstein said, "If I can watch."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Are you here just to torment me?"

"No, you're in luck Ron is ready to talk to you, but first you have to deliver on your end. Prove your loyalty and give us the codes to Malfoy's vaults."

"Anything you want." Hermione replied.

"She is a thief!" Lucius spat. "The fluffernutter's stealing all my money! Get her out of this cell!"

"Why the fuck does he keep calling you that?" Anthony leaned in against the bars, Hermione was afraid to make the wrong assumptions, but as she stared at his eyes, she wanted to be right, that he was on their side. That everything had gone according to plan. It was too risky to test in front of Lucius.

"I charmed the word Mudblood." Hermione stated.

"I liked you so much more for that," Goldstein chuckled, handing her piece of parchment and quill. "Write down all the codes passwords and any other relevant information."

"I'll come with you to do it." Hermione replied. "Let me out of this room."

"Not a chance." He said, smirking. Deciding not to push her luck, she wrote down everything she could think of then handed it back to him. "Can I please shower?"

"If this works." He said, sending her a wink.

A couple hours later Cormac McLaggen came in. "Granger." He glanced at Lucius. "You alright?"

"Yes," Hermione nodded, "What's happened?"

"They captured Harry and Pansy. They were hiding in the vaults." McLaggen shook his head. "They were outnumbered and I'm not sure what's happening with them now. Blaise and Theo are working on the wards."

Hermione didn't want to ask, but she couldn't help it, "And Draco?" she whispered it.

His eyes dropped down to the floor, "Goldstein's been having fun with him."

Hermione inhaled slowly, "I need to get the lab. I need a shower. And if you can find the location they're keep the ancient runes, that would be amazing."

"I'll do what I can." He said, "Don't look at Malfoy for too long. It's not great."

Hermione's stomach twisted, "If everything goes according to the plan, it will work out."

McLaggen nodded, "I've got to go, someone will be back in here later."

Hermione slumped back to the floor and closed her eyes, thinking of the last week she'd spent with Draco replaying their conversations.

It was the only thing that helped her feel hope.

# Chapter 39

**December 21st.**

“Competition?” Hermione arched a brow folding her arms over her chest. “You should allow me to kill him because you said I can have anything I want.”

Draco huffed, “I’ve spoiled you rotten haven’t I? But no, you do not get to kill him, because I want to kill him.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “When does the competition officially begin?”

“The day you get taken.” Draco mirrored her, crossing his arms, “You don’t know how badly I want to kill him, darling.” He arched his brow, “You don’t know how far I’ll go.”

“Then we need rules because I want to kill him too.” Hermione countered.

“It’s a strange thing to trust someone with your life, and yet not trust them in a competition.” Draco narrowed his eyes, suspiciously.

“Well, if you trusted me I’d seriously doubt your intelligence. I’m extremely competitive Draco.”

“I’m well aware.” Draco grabbed her roughly by the waist. “But you’re going to lose, this I promise you.” He kissed her on the nose.

“We’ll see.” Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’ve been told a time or two I’m quite clever.”

“Never underestimate my desire to kill Ron Weasely.”

“We need to update our plan though.” Hermione sighed. “Now that I know what I did, we need a plan to undo it.”

“I’ll tell Pilly to set up the potions room.”

Hermione grinned, “I love you.”

“I love you.” Draco whispered into her ear, “And I won’t go easy on you.”

“Promise?” Hermione replied.

**December 22nd**

Hermione was dripping in sweat as she switched between stirring boiling cauldrons and chopping ingredients.

The manor's potion room was something out of her dreams and she briefly wondered if Draco had designed it with her mind. She blushed, *not everything was about her.*

*But what if it is?* Draco murmured in her mind.

*Stop eavesdropping.* Hermione replied.

*Have you eaten today?*

*I'll come out for lunch.*

*It's 4 pm darling*

*Oh.*

Hermione stopped as she checked the clock. Time was going too fast. The amount of potions she had to make and have them hidden properly for this to work weighed down on her every minute. McLaggen's spy work had proven helpful once more by getting the potions Ron was using for sneaking around.

*How about you tell me how you'd like to kill Weasely and I'll tell you how I'd like to kill him and then we can have a vote from our friends to see which one is better?*

*Absolutely not.* Hermione replied, *there's no way to know who will get the opportunity. The first person to have the opportunity after ensuring the antidote works gets it.*

*I don't like that. What about this rule, If Weasley hits you I get to kill him.*

*Hermione rolled her eyes. I get to kill him because he's been poisoning me and erasing my memories and using me to create an army of followers for his terrible ideas.*

*That makes me want to kill him more.* Draco snarled. *I should have killed him the first time you went on a date with him, do you know how long I watched you that day? It was killing me, I think I'm owed killing him for the torture you put me through by dating him in the first place.*

*New rule, absolutely stay out of my mind.*

"No," Draco said as he walked through the door.

"Yes." Hermione huffed, while not taking her eyes on the cauldron she stirred. "We'll need privacy for the plan to work. You never know who may be a secret legilimens while we're doing this."

"It's time for a break darling."

Hermione blew hair out of her eyes finally looking his direction. Draco stood shirtless and sweaty in front of her, athletic shorts slung low around his hips. Hermione swallowed, “I’d love a break, actually.”

Draco smirked. Hermione was in a sports bra and leggings. Her nipples hardened as his eyes fell down her body. He moved closer, pinning her hips to the countertop. “This is similar to a few fantasies I’ve had about potions class.”

“Should I go get my school uniform?” Hermione whispered, running her hands down his abdomen.

He lifted her chin, “Next time.” He kissed her. “But you need to eat and we need to have a meeting with everyone.”

“What have you been up to?” Hermione ran her hands up his neck and into his hair.

“Just making sure I’m prepared for when I kill your ex-boyfriend.” He smirked.

“When I kill him, you mean?” Hermione tugged on his hair in emphasis.

“Harder,” Draco whispered into her ear.

“I need a shower before we meet with the others,” Hermione replied.

Draco’s hands moved up her torso, “It’s like you can read my mind.”

## December 23rd

Sweat dripped down Hermione’s back as she carried a hot cauldron off the flame to cool. Then without warning, found herself sliding down the cupboards, letting out a slow cry. It was a deep, ugly one. A cry for all that was wrong in the world and all the things she couldn’t control. They were running out of time and Hermione feared that she wasn’t strong enough. That her magic would crumble when the time was right. She covered her face with her hands and wept.

This plan had been her idea, after all, most of it anyway.

They all trusted her. They were all risking their lives for her.

Draco’s hands found hers, peeling them away from her tear-stained, sweaty face. He sat beside her pulling her to him.

Without having to say it, he knew. Things were becoming stressful around the manor. Their new guests, the organization of it all, hardly anyone was sleeping, and everyone was on edge looking to Hermione to lead the way. His thumbs swiped across her cheeks and his jaw

feathered, "If you say the word, I'll take you far away from here. No one would find us, darling, ever."

She sniffled, "You'd do that? Leave everyone behind? Leave your mother?"

"I would do anything for you," Draco replied firmly. "And if you have any doubt, I'd rip the world apart for you too. If you die Hermione..." His voice trailed off, his eyes fell to the ground, then his eyes locked on hers again, "I'd kill everyone. No one would survive my wrath."

### **Christmas Eve, December 24th**

Draco rolled his eyes, "Stop being mad, I don't like it."

Hermione glared at him as she slipped on her shoes, ignoring him.

"We have dinner with everyone downstairs and you've been short with me all day, what is the problem?" He looked at her blankly and she flipped him off.

"I just want to hear you say it one more time, darling." He said innocently.

He kept calling her his fiancée and still no ring. Pansy had a wedding planned literally for tomorrow and still no ring was on her finger. Her father was downstairs, for their rehearsal and Christmas Eve dinner and still no ring.

"Get fucked." Hermione said, tossing her nose in the air as she brushed past him.

"I plan to!" Draco called back at her.

Later that night their group of friends sat on a long couch, Hermione was tasked with picking a movie for them to watch.

"Only ones where they end up together!" Draco said.

When the movie ended, everyone was crying. Draco especially deserved it.

"I will never trust you to pick a movie again." Draco said shaking his head, eyes rimmed red, "What the fuck was that?"

"It was a beautiful love story." Hermione said wiping her tears.

"You have great taste in movies." Blaise said. "I'll watch them with you anytime."

Pansy and Ginny sat wide-eyed and expressionless, "I love it." Ginny said, nodding.

Neville blinked, "It was lovely and awful."

"What is this called again?" Theo asked, wiping a tear away.

“A Walk to Remember,” Hermione replied.

“You are all traitors.” Draco said standing, “we’re leaving now.” he grabbed Hermione’s hand pulling her off the couch, muttering to himself, “happy ending my ass.”

“Happy Christmas, everyone,” Hermione waved as they left.

“You said they end up together, not a happy ending,” Hermione said smugly. Draco silently led her back to their room after which Draco turned to her, “Sit down, please.”

She sighed, sitting on the closest wingback chair.

“Hermione,” Draco said as he dropped down to one knee. Hermione’s eyes widened and her heart pounded in her chest. Draco knelt down on both knees and placed his hands over hers in her lap. He smiled at her and her throat tightened painfully.

“I have loved you for *so long*.” Draco’s voice became strained and his throat bobbed, “When I was in Azkaban I hoped one day I could talk to you and be your friend. I began listening to muggle music so I could know every song that you liked. I began watching muggle movies because I wanted to be able to know all your favorite movies. Now that I know you have horrible taste in movies I could have skipped that, but I’ll hopefully influence your movie tastes going forward.”

Hermione laughed as a tear fell down her cheek.

“I look forward to the future because of you. I think about traveling with you and endless museum trips and attending lectures on potions and ancient runes. I think about being on your future book tours and the safety wards I’ll have to design. I think about what it would be like to be a father...” His voice cracked and he inhaled sharply. “I think about growing old with you. I have never had so much hope for my future in my entire life. So before we find ourselves risking our lives and risky our futures, will you please marry me? If I die—“

“you’re not going to die.” Hermione said, as more tears fell.

“When I die,” He reached into his pocket. “Whether that’s in a month or a century from now, I want to die as your husband. I want to have you as my wife. Please marry me.” Draco opened the velvet ring box, revealing a stunning two stone ring, a pear-shaped diamond and a rectangular-cut emerald

“Yes, yes, finally.” Hermione smiled, leaning towards him. She was shaking and crying and had never felt more sure of anything in her life. He was right. If she died, she’d wanted to be known as his. Draco’s eyes shut briefly before he took her hand and slid on the ring.

“I would love to be your wife Draco.” Hermione said before kissing him.

He smiled as he kissed her, “Gods, I didn’t know how good that would feel to hear.”

“You were really pushing your luck you know,” Hermione said, staring at the beautiful ring.

"I would feel guilty, but we have been incredibly busy the past few days, I think you could understand."

Hermione pulled him close to her. "Are you ready to see your Christmas present?"

"We said we weren't doing presents." Draco's jaw tightened, "Don't make me feel guilty for trusting you."

"Well, I think you'll feel differently in a few moments." Hermione's stomach fluttered. Gods this was nerve-wracking. She really hoped he loved it.

Hermione tapped her collarbone with her wand, making the small *DM* appear. It was in his handwriting, where he loved kissing her.

His mouth dropped open, in a wide smile, "Darling,"

"I know it's not your full name, but you did say you wanted your name all over me." Hermione swallowed.

Draco leaned forward pressing a kiss to it, "I love it."

"There's more," Hermione said, mischief in her eyes.

Draco's eyes lit up, "Have you created a treasure hunt for me, darling?"

"Yes," Hermione grinned.

Draco found a few of them easily. There was one on her ring finger, one behind her ear, one on her ankle. It wasn't until he took off her clothes that the real one came into view. Down her spine, made up of delicate stars was the Draco constellation, the larger stars complete with tiny DMs in the center.

"You are so perfect." Draco's tone was reverent as his hand ran gently up and down her spine over the tattoo, softly kissing her shoulder. "I can't believe you did this." He whispered in awe.

"I think you underestimate how I feel about you," Hermione said, half offended.

"I know you love me, but this is just...so perfect." Draco traced the back of her neck and down her throat to her collarbone.

"You might think my reluctance to be called yours was my lack of feelings towards you, but it was the opposite Draco. I felt overwhelmed by any scenario that you didn't feel the way I did. That it was just a joke to you." She turned to face him. "I was as obsessed with you, just not as brave as you were about it."

Her voice got quieter. "I keep remembering bits of our time together after the warehouse and at the same time, I remember moments where you tried to get me to remember before. We dressed up as Roger Rabbit for Merlin's sake." She shook her head. "You kept trying to remind me of how it felt to be together, I think parts of me could remember. You've

continuously saved my life, and even though I hate that we didn't get to decide how our story began, part of me is grateful someone tampered with our mail, because we still found a way to each other, after everything that happened."

Draco's hand caressed her face, thumb brushing her cheek, "I think being obsessed with each other for the rest of our lives and any life hereafter sounds like a dream."

Hermione glanced up at him, "You're going to have to be patient for this all to work you know."

"I'm going to have to say and do things Hermione..."

"I know." She whispered.

"I'm going to hate it. Watching other people touch you." Draco said, his voice strained.

Hermione looked at him, "I don't know." She shrugged, "could be sort of fun."

His eyes narrowed as he smirked, "You just like when I'm jealous." He pushed her playfully onto the bed. Hermione crawled backward as he prowled forward, undoing his belt. As it came off, she let her legs fall open, revealing one last surprise.

At the apex of her left thigh, in her handwriting, was *Draco's Whore*.

"Fucking perfect," Draco breathed, falling onto his knees once again.

"I thought seeing me the night before our wedding was bad luck?" Hermione said, as his mouth worked its way up her legs.

"There is no way in hell I'll be letting you out of my sight until December 30th," Draco said against her thigh.

Hermione flexed her hand out in front of her staring at the two large stones, before running it through Draco's hair. She might be addicted to this view.

## Chapter 40

Anthony Goldstein's face was completely blank as he held Hermione's arm, presenting her to Ron. He squeezed her slightly before letting go, stepping back into the shadows.

Hermione had finally showered thankfully without Goldstein being allowed in, dressed in a scantily clad purple dress, and was being led into a large ballroom. Her magic was back, not her wand, but she could feel it again in her veins and it was the best gift she could ask for in this moment. Especially considering how scared she felt. She had faith in the plan, but it was stressful because they had to wait for the right time or it would not go well. There were many Brotherhood members walking the halls and lounging in rooms. One wrong move and a wand would be held to her neck.

Her heart beat harshly against her chest, but she kept her head held high as she walked further into the room.

She didn't know what she expected. Maybe a room full of Brotherhood members jeering at her calling her names, or bidding on which bed she'd find herself in. But no, it was just Ron, at a small table set for two, no food, just two glasses of wine. Candles floated in the air, almost romantically.

It was the the throne behind the table that made her nauseous. Its rounded base held tiered steps leading to a tall gold chair. He truly wanted to be king.

A couple of Guards stood at the only entrance and exit of the room.

"I'm glad to see you, Mione."

Hermione swallowed as she approached the table. A wine glass was filled with *something* on the table. She hesitated before sitting down and Ron saw her apprehension. "I'm not going to hurt you," He said in a voice that was familiar to her, the sincerity in it was what Hermione remembered from the Ron she grew up with. The Ron who she cared for, but the bits and pieces of memories she'd received from Draco, made her unwilling to trust that familiarity.

She sat down finally making eye contact with him.

"Where should we even start?" Ron said with a cold chuckle, before he took another long drink of wine. He leaned forward, hands clasped together.

"I would start with why you're trying to enslave muggleborns, why you took over the government, or why you've been stalking me and trying to destroy my life." Hermione shrugged, "but that's just me."

Ron sighed. "I think you've gotten the wrong impression of me."

Hermione clenched her jaw. The laugh she wanted to cackle in his face would certainly not help her in this moment.

"Then let's start with why you're hurting people. Why are you doing any of this?" Hermione willed herself not to cry.

"I don't want to hurt anyone. I will." He said, eyes going wide, "But I don't want to." He leaned back looking her up and down for several moments. "I was so in love with you," he finally said, shaking his head. "When we broke up after the war, I understood it was probably too soon to get married and too rushed and blah blah blah." He mimed with his hand. "And so I put my head down and got to work. I thought that if I could build a future for us, you'd see how well we'd work together. I've been building a legacy that would take care of you. And then after years of waiting for you, I finally had you. We were so happy. Albeit sometimes I had to help you out, but a little Amortentia never hurt anyone."

Hermione's whole body became inflamed with anger. "It hurt me!" She straightened in the chair. "You didn't give me have a choice in the matter and that hurts, Ron."

Ron shook his head, "Then you had to start getting nosey and ruin all of our fun." He waved a finger at her, smiling like he caught her pulling a prank on him. "The strange thing is I only have you to thank now. Your nosiness got my wheels turning. You were the one who came up with the backbone of the potions that helped create my legacy."

Hermione's stomach turned to lead, crushing her insides makes it hard to breathe. "No," she breathed out. "You've manipulated me from the beginning, I will not take responsibility for your choices. Now you've taken our friends, your sister!"

"Those four made their choice the moment they tried to attack my men." Ron said, "Did you think that ambushing us in the vaults wasn't predictable? I am a strategist Hermione. I am here to lead a community that has been suffering for long enough. Harry Potter was supposed to save the world, but all he did was lead us to economic misery, and allow muggle borns to take our jobs. It's time to change things. Unfortunately, that had to include taking you, although I appreciate you coming willingly."

"I told you in my letters, I'm here to help you figure everything out." Hermione willed herself to remain calm. Ron's smug smile told her he was enjoying toying with her.

He smirked coldly, turning his wine glass around slowly on the table, "I'm not an idiot. I know you still care for Malfoy. He's convinced you to forgive him somehow. Your bleeding heart can't look away from broken things." His eyes were so bitter, Hermione almost found herself feeling guilty. "Your letters didn't convince me that you want to be without him. Another trick to make me think you're on my side." He chuckled, "So very predictable. I was surprised that you gave me his vaults so quickly, but then Harry and Pansy were inside. Took them down so fast it was hardly a fair fight." Ron paused and his face changed into something uglier, something more vicious, a hollow chuckle escaping his lips. "You tried to breakup with me just a two weeks after we started dating. You don't remember of course, but you'd hardly given me a chance. It wasn't fair." He gritted the words between his teeth. "Then again a few weeks later you tried to do it again. And then again and then again and again. It was exhausting what you put me through, but I knew, I *knew* you were mine." Ron lifted his glass of wine in toast draining the cup and setting down it with a loud crack, "I realized that I didn't want to work so damn hard to make you love me. In fact, it was then that I realized there is something more important than love. And that's loyalty. I'd rather

have loyalty than love because love comes and goes. You tried to break up with me so many damn times. And I was so forgiving. That's when I began sparking your curiosity with the idea of a loyalty potion." His face turned smug again. "All I had to do was ask if it was possible and suddenly your mind was spinning with theory possibilities. Convincing you to experiment with the Loyalty potion the first time was difficult, especially after you obliivated yourself once you realized what we made together. The potion recipe that was so dark and incredible you said no one should be trusted with it. That's when I realized there's no one I could trust but myself. I had to make you do the potion again. And again. And again. Who knows what that original potion was." He sighed, "But that's why you're here. You'll stay here until the original potion is made and you fix what you broke."

Hermione had no words to describe the warring sensations inside of her. But she had never hated Ron more than in that moment. There were no signs of the person who she once cared for. He was wholly changed. Corrupted by resentment and bitterness.

"Why did you let me leave then?" Hermione thought about when they broke up, the break up when she moved out, two weeks after Draco had saved her from the warehouse.

He pursed his lips searching for the right words, "At first, I thought you were working with someone else behind my back, stealing the recipe for yourself, so I set up a trap to see what would happen if I took you to the warehouse. I had you working there before, but this time I set a bread crumb trail to see who came after you. The coincidence of some random person coming upon my warehouse was one thing, but then you disappeared into thin air for several days and came back with no memories of the time you spent in the warehouse? It was like Merlin blessed me himself." Ron laughed, "I had enough potions, the Greengrass family offering me thier daughter, and more money than I knew what to do with. One way or another, I was going to get you back, but I needed to reward myself first. I have a legacy to build and punishing you was just too much fun. Especially knowing you couldn't even remember it."

"Is that what you've built your legacy on? Forcing people to be loyal to you through a potion?" Hermione's body was cold with deep horror.

Ron grinned, "yeah, some people just need help finding the right pathway, but many others don't need a potion. They just need something to believe in. And that's why I'm the King, people believe in me."

"And Daphne? Is she forced to love you like you forced me?"

Ron's smile turned into something nightmarish. "It's funny you mention that. No, Daph is honestly the best person I've ever met. It's a wild thing to be so heartbroken and meet someone who you realize was a much better match for you. Daphne and I were both hurt when we got together, by you and Malfoy, of all people. the fact that you were two got together, was almost fate's thread weaving our plan together that much easier."

Hermione's chest squeezed painfully.

"And when Daphne and I were honest about how cruel it was to want someone who promised you a future only to realize you were led you on. It bonded us." He narrowed his eyes on her

"Did you know Malfoy fucked Daphne? Led her to believe they'd be married after the war?"

"Ron we were children. You can't hold what we say against us when we were going through a war." Hermione's breathing was becoming unsteady.

"Yeah, well we disagree." He shrugged. "Daph and I love each other because we can trust each other with all our thoughts." And Hermione's skin flashed cold at the diabolical glint in his eye.

"And where is your fiancée now?" Hermione asked, she needed to keep him talking. Keep him telling on himself.

"Oh," Ron's expression with haughty. "She's with Draco, but I don't usually ask about the dirty details when they're alone though." He said with a wink, "I do know she's fond of licking him, and touching-"

"Shut up." Hermione breathing was harsh.

Ron laughed loudly, becoming energized off of her reaction. He'd been baiting her and she'd fallen for it again.

"I am many, many things, but I'm not a liar." Ron shook his head, relaxing deeper into his chair.

"Here is what I want, Hermione. You'll be unharmed and forgiven for all the horrible things you've done, if you cooperate with me. I need you to continue making potions, and a few more potions I have come up with. I want to start experimenting with a true love potion." He winked at her. "And in return at some point when I can fully trust you, you'll gain more freedom. Maybe you'll even be allowed out of the house." He smiled.

"I want to see Draco." She replied, her lip trembling. "Show me he's alive."

Ron's jaw clenched. "I knew you were lying in that letter, but I don't get it, Hermione. What does he have that I don't? Daphne I can understand, her schoolgirl crush and all, but you? You saw all the horrific things he'd done and yet you still chose him. Still, after he bullied you? After he helped death eaters into Hogwarts?"

"And how are you any better?" Hermione spat. She could see all of their similarities. Ron had been stalking her just as Draco, but it didn't feel the same, because they weren't the same.

"Because I want good things for the wizarding world!" Ron said, standing abruptly making his chair fall backward. "I want the wizarding world to be a safe place for men like me who get overlooked." He slammed his fist into the table, "Draco had money and all the attention in the world from his parents and he made mistake after mistake! Suddenly he comes back into the wizarding world as some kind of prince?" Ron's neck vein pulsed. "He doesn't deserve it. We don't need another snot nosed spoiled prat leading our kind, we need a king." He hissed. "We need someone who can lead and do the right thing for the whole of mankind. Draco Malfoy only has ever done things for himself!"

"He's a good person. And you are not. That's the difference." Hermione said with as much venom as she could. "You can't even see how much you are mimicking Voldemort, Ron."

"Voldemort went about his goals the wrong way." Ron shrugged, frowning at her. "I'm not interested in killing Harry Potter."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Hermione said, standing.

"Do you even hear me?" Ron snapped. "I need you to agree to my terms or there's going to be a cost that you're not going to want to pay, Hermione."

Her whole body was shaking, "What is your grand plan Ron? What is it that you hope to accomplish with all of these potions and control?"

"There is no plan." Ron smiled but it was forced this time, "I don't care what people do day to day. Everyone in the brotherhood has been appointed to roles and delegated jobs to run the ministry while I enjoy all the rewards of my labor. All I want is to be happy. All I want is to marry Daphne, become King of wizarding London, and perhaps the world at some point, and live a life free of stress. I am a very simple man."

Hermione blinked rapidly as tears fell, "So you plan to take over the world?"

"Don't make it sound so horrible. You'll be busy working too. You'll be happy making potions and training other muggle-borns to do the same. Every family in wizarding London will have a muggle born to attend to their needs, make their potions, and live in luxury. It's the best of both worlds. You get to practice magic and we purebloods get to benefit from it without you taking away our place in the world."

"You are a monster." She spat.

"I am trying to be nice to you, but I guess we'll have to do things the hard way." His smile fell away and then gestured at the guards. Cormac McLaggen was brought into the room, his hands tied with a wet rope, mouth gagged with a soaked cloth. His face was pale, drained of all color. His eyes were full of fear when he met Hermione's. Hermione choked on a sob.

"Remove his gag." Ron ordered. The guard did. "Have anything to say for yourself?"

Cormac's eyes held onto Hermione's as his chin tremble, he winked as tears fell from his eyes.

"Crucio." Ron said it casually, but the green light flared bright as it struck Cormac directly to the chest. Cormac's body fell with a heavy thump, convulsing on the ground. Ron stared at her, no rush to stop the torture.

"Okay!" Hermione screamed, "I'll agree to your terms, but you had to have an antidote as well, or this potion will never be perfect."

Ron just stared at her.

"Ron, stop this!" She couldn't look at the screaming body on the ground. Hermione covered her face with her hands, choking on the sobs wracking her body.

"That was for not protecting my fiancée properly when extracting Hermione." Ron said to a writhing Cormac.

Hermione vomited next to her chair as the memory of her own crucio came back vividly. Her body shook violently as fear rattled through her bones...Ron waved his wand and the sick disappeared and then silenced Cormac's screaming.

"Like I said, I don't want to hurt anyone but I will if I have to." Ron's face was blank as he pushed away from the table, now I think I'll go fuck my fiancée, she's always so turned on after playing with Draco." Ron grinned.

"She crucioed me." Hermione said, sucking in a sharp breath. Ron stopped in his tracks.  
"The night I got here, she hit me, she-"

Ron flicked his wand towards Cormac who was choking and gagging, crying loudly, finally putting an end to his pain and turned towards Hermione.

"Do not spread lies about my future wife Hermione. You will win no favors by trying to turn me against her. I know what you're doing." Ron's face was an angry red.

Hermione's tears fell in earnest, "I'm not lying." She said, meekly. "I-I-" She squeezed her eyes closed, then opened them staring at Ron, "It was worse than Bellatrix." She cried. Ron's eyes softened slightly before schooling his face again. "Daphne said you hit her with a curse, I don't trust anything you say."

"Ron, I came here willingly. For you!" She pleaded, standing on wobbly legs. "I came here to figure this out, to help you, I do want to help, I'll agree to all your terms," her voice cracked. "Please, I have been trying to show you- didn't you get my letters?" Hermione frowned, "I've written to you so many times."

Ron's brows knitted together, "What letters?" He moved closer to her.

"Dozens." Hermione lowered her voice, glancing uncomfortably at the guards stationed around the room, she lowered her voice.

"I sent you multiple letters asking you for help after the gala." Her voice broke again, "Draco, obliterated me, Ron. He was the one in the warehouse that night. He took me away from you." Hermione's tears fell down her cheeks and she stepped closer to him, "You can't trust her." She carefully reached her hand out, loosely interlocking their fingers, rubbing her thumb against his hand. Ron's mouth tightened. "Just ask her, she'll probably deny hitting me, just like she'll deny the letters, but you can ask Lucius, he has no reason to lie. He thinks very little of me. Give him some truth serum."

The ballroom's doors flung open with a chorus of laughter, Ron pulled away from Hermione quickly, but his eyes slowly left hers. Daphne's her vanished, with her arm linked with Susan

Bones, they both glared at Hermione. Behind them a few more Brotherhood members stood, including Marcus Flint and Dean Thomas.

“Did we let the little mudblood out of her cage already?” Daphne said, smirking. “I was just telling Susan, about my afternoon with Draco.”

“Scandalous.” Susan giggled.

Hermione wanted to vomit again.

Ron frowned, “Daphne, did you crucio Hermione?”

Daphne scoffed, but struggled to look innocent. She looked annoyed at the question, not scared of his reaction. “She deserved it.” Daphne finally said.

Ron’s eye fell to the floor and he inhaled sharply, “What did I tell you about disobeying me?”

Daphne swallowed, “I’m sorry, I just, she confundoed me and I think it’s fair to have revenge.”

“If you want revenge take it out on Draco, that was the deal.” Ron spat. “Hermione is mine to deal with.”

“You’re right, I apologize.” Daphne nodded.

“You’ll need to set her up in the lab tomorrow.” Ron said, “We need more potion since you can’t seem to fucking figure it out.”

Daphne straightened, looking offended for the first time, “I am the whole reason this is working in the first place, I have kept us afloat, I toiled endlessly in the lab, how about you remember who has been funding this whole thing!”

Hermione moved closer to Ron, reaching for his arm. Ron reached behind him, grabbing her. “Stay away from Hermione, or I’ll hide Draco and you won’t get to see him anymore.”

“Fine.” Daphne said, glaring at Hermione, who’d tucked herself beside Ron, she glared right back. Hermione should have fucking hit her with an acid hex, but that would have been too obvious.

“Goldstein,” Ron said, “Take Hermione to my room.”

As Anthony approached, he tilted his head saying, “Malfoy say anything helpful tonight, Greengrass?”

“No, he was cursed with a really annoying blubbering hex that we can’t seem to reverse. All he’s been doing is speaking nonsense, but as soon as he’s gagged and I’m playing with him,” Daphne smirked at Hermione, “Then he just enjoys the hell out of himself.”

Hermione replied, "Did you steal my letters Daphne?"

Daphne grinned wider, "Of course I did. Couldn't let you take what's mine. I've been monitoring your mail for years."

Ron's hand was hard and fast. He backhanded Daphne, sending her stumbling against Susan, "You little bitch."

"Ron," Daphne screamed, "What are you doing?"

"You can't listen to gods damned thing I say!" Ron shook his head. "Stay away from Hermione."

Goldstein grabbed Hermione's arm pulling her close and said, "Weasley, we should celebrate."

"Huh?" Ron huffed, "What?"

"Boss King," Goldstein said, "You are so stressed and I think you deserve a good night to enjoy your hard work." His arm wrapped around Hermione's shoulders. "This whole thing has been rather successful, don't you think?" Goldstein glanced around the ballroom, "We should celebrate the capture of Potter and Parkinson, the fact that we stole vaults worth of money from Malfoy, and we have Granger now. Tomorrow she'll make the potions and by the end of the week you'll be able to start distributing them. You need to celebrate your success. You're doing a great job." Goldstein grinned, his grip tightening around Hermione.

"Yeah, you're right." Ron huffed, "You're right. Let's focus on the all that I've been able to accomplish. I am king after all."

"Exactly." Goldstein said, "I believe we should show our new guests exactly who is in charge."

Ron nodded, glancing at a few of the other brotherhood members, "Get McLaggen in that cell with Lucius. I'll deal with him later." Ron moved towards Daphne, reaching out a hand to help her up. He caressed her, pulling her close, and whispered something into her ear.

Their relationship was truly disturbing.

"Boss King," Goldstein said, "I'll keep a watch on Granger tonight, make sure she doesn't try anything sneaky."

Ron glanced over, nodding, "Yeah, and let's get Malfoy in here. Just as a reminder of what's at risk." It turned out Draco wasn't just a threat for Hermione, but Daphne too.

An hour later, the ballroom was blaring music. Ron was lazily sitting in his throne. Hermione was perched precariously on Goldstein's knee, where he sat in a large chair near the base of the throne. Hermione was doing everything she could not to lean into him.

It sent Hermione's heart lurching into her stomach as Harry, Pansy, Ginny, and Neville were all brought inside, they were chained with the same cuffs Hermione had been in. They were all bruised, evidence of being beaten.

"We've been giving them the last of the loyalty potions," Ron said to Hermione as he straightened in his throne, "They're under my control now. Watch." Ron leaned forward, sloshing his drink in the process, "Jump on one leg!"

The four jumped on one leg. Hermione watched carefully, wishing she could test out some theories about the potion. Harry caught her eye and she felt a certainty inside her bones that her theories were right. You couldn't actually make someone loyal, just like you couldn't make someone love you with Amortentia. It was the ghost of the real thing, compulsion maybe, but certainly not loyalty. Ron threw his head back in a roaring laugh, "Quack like ducks!"

They obeyed. Neville's grin, with his split lip promised retribution. And Hermione knew exactly what she'd have them when the time was right.

They were placed at the side of the room after Ron made them twirl around like ballerinas, and forced them to stand the whole time with sticking charms. Draco was brought in last. He was wheeled in on a moving platform, his arms strung across a tall wide piece of wood. His wrists cuffed to the corners. He wore no shirt, his tattoos bare for all to see. Bruised and bloody, his head was hung low. They placed him at the opposite end of the room, facing the throne, directly in front of the entrance and where Ron could see him the entire time. Daphne walked in shortly after, in a long black gown, she kissed Draco on the forehead, looking directly at Hermione afterward as she made her way towards Ron, sitting on the arm of the throne. A queen with no throne, is no queen at all. That had to bother her.

"Weasley," Goldstein snapped, "Tell Granger to fucking relax, she's stiff as a statue."

"Hermione, just enjoy yourself. You need to be grateful for the fact that you're not chained like the rest of them. Relax or you will join them." Ron shook his head as Daphne caressed his neck. "Now, let's get some food in here!"

Hermione inhaled sharply as Goldstein's hand tugged her closer, she hesitantly laid her head against his chest, relaxing slightly. Her heart thudded so hard she could barely breathe. She did not want to give Ron any reason to restrict her freedom. She needed to make the antidote as fast as she could. Blaise was somewhere nearby, hacking into the camera system's McLaggen had set up. They'd get the evidence they needed soon enough, Ron's confession would be sent to every wizarding community in the world.

One step at a time. They just had to be patient.

Over three dozen brotherhood members began trickling in throughout the evening. Where they danced, took drugs, drank, and ate messily at the tables scattered around the room, before dry humping their girlfriends and wives on the dance floor.

Draco occasionally made babbling noises, talking in gibberish. The room only laughed at him each time. “*I am not supposed to be like this! I am not here! There I am!*”

“Draco, sweetie, tell me you love me.” Daphne cooed from in front of him. “When can we give him the loyalty potion!” She said, her words slurred as she spun around to find Ron on the dance floor with Susan Bones grinding against him. Hermione could still not understand the rules of their relationship. Daphne skipped back to Ron, shoving Susan out of her way.

Draco never looked at Hermione.

So she had to risk it.

*Draco...* No answer came.

*Draco.* No answer came.

*Draco!* No answer came. *Okay fine, you know what ignore me. I'm sorry okay?*

*You're sorry?*” He finally hissed, “*Sorry after the stunt you pulled? I should have known. Gryffindor's princess my ass. You're Slytherin to the core.*”

“*You're stronger than me, I had to get a head's start.*” Hermione knew he'd be annoyed with her about her changing the plans, it had to be real enough for Ron.

“*You're a dirty little cheat.*”

“*I just really want to kill him so badly, love. Please forgive me?*”

“*Nope. Not a chance. If you're going to play dirty, I'm going to play dirty.*” Draco's voice was like balm to her aching heart. She allowed herself a small smile. Goldstein's heart thumped loudly against her ear, as he sipped his wine.

“*We never ended up agreeing on any rules...*”

Goldstein's free hand began brushing up and down her leg.

“*Yeah, well we were too busy arguing about the rules in bed. I think arguing somehow made things better...*”

*"How are Harry and Pansy doing?"* Hermione dared ask. Also needing to change the topic of conversation. She missed him so much.

*"They're okay. Not great, but okay. The potion is very weak on them."* Draco replied.

*"My theory is that it operates on a strong emotion and they are too brave for it to work the way its intended or maybe that's why I designed it that I."* She couldn't suppress her laugh. And Goldstein shifted at the noise. She stilled as his arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her too close.

*"Just relax, Granger."* He hissed.

*"You're enjoying this too much."* Hermione huffed.

*"I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. Don't get punished over something so stupid."*

*What's so funny?* Draco's voice helped her relax again.

*"The strong emotion...your father seems to be loyal to me."* Hermione giggled.

*"Perhaps you shouldn't give him any antidote."* Draco muttered.

*"I've been threatening him with just that."*

They were quiet for awhile, but their channels of communication were open, like they could just listen to the other breathe. It was exactly what she needed.

*"I'll see you on the other side."*

*"On the other side, darling."*

The debauchery continued well into the night. Goldstein was content with her sitting on his lap, tucked under her arm, even though Ron and Daphne begged him to join them on the dance floor he waved them off. They returned to groping each other on the dance floor along with the rest of the brotherhood members until they were all drunken messes. Once they were finally finished with the revelry Ron announced, "All the prisoners can return to their cells." Goldstein lifted Hermione off his lap and wrapped his arm around her waist as they began walking out.

Ron turned towards Hermione, pointing and curling his finger at her. "Except you. You are coming with me."

Hermione stiffened. "Why?"

"You'll sleep in my room." Ron's words slurred.

"You promised me I could have her tonight." Goldstein snapped.

"I didn't," Ron said, glaring in his direction, "You bloody imbecile."

"Ron, I don't want to sleep with you." Hermione's voice shook as he approached her.

Daphne cackled, "You're not going to sleep *with* him, you'll sleep in our room. So we know exactly where our pet brain is at all times. No tricks, no sneaking around our estate."

That's where they were. It was so obvious now. They were in the countryside estate that they held that gala in.

"No, I have worked my ass off the last few days," Goldstein snarled. "She's coming with me."

Ron jerked away from Daphne, sneering at Anthony. Ron grabbed his wand, pressing it straight to his chest, "What's gotten into you Goldstein? Why do you think you can talk to me like that? Go put her in that damn cage in my room before I start experimenting on you next."

Goldstein's jaw tightened. "Apologies, boss."

The four of them walked into a giant room, a dog's cage was to one side and Hermione was deposited there by a reluctant Goldstein. He suddenly went stiff as Ron and Daphne stood by him, watching as he locked Hermione inside.

"You can stay and watch Goldstein." Daphne said as she began undressing.

"No, I need to get some sleep." His words were short and bitter.

Ron and Daphne fled to their bathroom thank Merlin, and Hermione found herself in a small dog bed, just grateful it was clean. She pressed the pillow over her head as Daphne's moans began echoing in the bathroom.

*Where are you?* She tempted fate again.

*There are known legilimens in this manor Granger, why are you risking your life?*

*I needed to hear your voice again, anything besides the noise Daphne is faking.*

*Are you okay?*

*I'll need to obliviate my memories of this. Maybe I'll ask Ron to do since he's so fond of it.*

*That's not fucking funny.*

*Sorry, but you're not hearing what I'm hearing.*

*No, but I've heard some pretty unimaginable things the last few days.*

*Is everything going according to the plan?*

*Everything is going according to the plan. Tomorrow will be tricky.*

*We are so close.*

*I love you, you have to stop talking to me though. It's hard enough as it is... try to get some rest darling*

## Chapter 41

Four days passed and they'd all been the same. Every morning they let Hermione out of her cage to shower. And she wished she could scrub the sounds out of her fucking ears after listening to Daphne shriek at volumes that Hermione knew from experience Ron could not achieve.

After her shower, she'd eat with Goldstein, who walked her to the potions room where Hermione was then watched by Daphne and Goldstein the entire time, forced to work on the Loyalty potion. It was such a beautiful potion. So complex and well balanced. It was stroking her ego as she worked to undo the puzzle she'd made for herself. It was helpful for her to make the potion and the antidote side by side she explained to Daphne on the first day. Daphne had understood the logic which surprised Hermione, but as Daphne watched her unlock the potion's recipe within the first hour. Daphne's ire grew. Daphne did not like that Hermione was smarter than her. If Daphne only knew Hermione's true extent of intelligence it would make her brain into soup. It took everything inside Hermione to remain focused on her task. Which she could do because she had incredible compartmentalization skills. She'd only been doing that very thing with Draco since Hogwarts.

When she was finished for the day, they'd throw another drunken party where she sat on Goldstein's lap and watched as her friends stood silently on the sidelines. Draco's body still chained on the planks of rolling wood. It was exhausting to watch the Brotherhood. How could they not be bored with themselves.

Daphne's attitude turned to the only think she believed she held over Hermione's nerve. Each day after realizing Hermione was incredibly skilled, she spent bragging about all her escapades with Draco. Specifically she wanted to talk about only time they'd consensually slept together, years ago. She wanted Hermione to hear every dirty detail, every time he touched her and stroked her, or about how he teased her and complimented her.

Hermione couldn't wait till she could knock the fuck out of her. She knew how competent Draco was in the bedroom, she did not need to know how he learned to be. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was Daphne criticizing her every move while she prepared the potions.

*“Don’t chop like that. You’re not good at potions are you? Malfoy was better than you in school. You suck at stirring. Do it faster. What is wrong with you, don’t use that.”*

It was a little after lunchtime on the fourth day when Daphne wandered back into the potions room.

“Why are you using Gillyweed water?” Daphne sniffed near a boiling cauldron. “That doesn’t seem right.” Hermione had had enough of Daphne Greengrass to last a lifetime.

“You wouldn’t know what is right since you couldn’t replicate my potion,” Hermione replied with a bitter smile. She decided she didn’t need to hold her tongue anymore. Today was a perfect day to pick a fight.

“As soon as this is proven effective, I’m going to kill you.” Daphne smiled.

“How many orgasms do you have to fake every night?” Hermione replied as she stirred the cauldron, “Because you sound like you’re dying donkey.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think, it only matters that I have both the men you love and I’m queen of the wizarding world.” Daphne’s smug smirk made Hermione smile wider.

Hermione turned grabbing a dull knife and began chopping castor beans wishing they were Daphne’s hands. “It’s strange you don’t have a throne though. Who can respect a queen without one?” The taunt in her voice was obvious and Daphne’s hands balled into fists.

“You are nothing more than a giant brain. You realize that? No one wants you here.”

“Right, *your Majesty*, I don’t even want to be here.” Hermione sighed, “Once I leave this place I’ll never think of you again. You will be the forgotten queen.”

“Greengrass!” Goldstein snapped. Hermione turned to see Daphne’s wand held to Hermione’s face.

“How about I disfigure that face of yours, Granger?” Daphne said, “We’ll see if Draco even recognizes you after you’re all sliced up.”

Hermione stared into her green eyes and realized how much she meant it. Daphne wasn’t trapped here, she wanted this all as much as Ron did. Maybe more. Hermione had definitely underestimated her. Now that she knew it was Daphne who had tampered with Draco’s Azkaban letters, tampered with Hermione’s mail. Daphne had been the one stalking Hermione first. Waiting for the opportunity to pounce.

“Do it.” Hermione hissed, “Slice my face open.” Hermione’s grin grew wicked, “And watch Draco still choose.”

“Daphne!” Goldstein held his wand up, “Ron will not be happy with this. Don’t make him angrier than he already is, he’s been in a pissy mood all day.”

“Because she can’t seem to work fast enough.” Daphne grinned maliciously. “Ron’s been quite upset, taking it out on our brave Harry Potter. Everything is all your fault Hermione. Your friends being hurt, your boyfriend has forgotten all about you. And I’m about to carve you open like the animal you are.”

Hermione stepped closer, letting the wand nearly touch her forehead. “You’re weak, you can’t even make the fight fair. Give me a wand and let’s see who comes out of it alive.”

“You don’t deserve magic!” Daphne said. “You never deserved it! Just like you never deserved Draco. He would have married me after his Azkaban release! If it hadn’t been for you infiltrating his family, and messing with Narcissa’s head! Filling her ears with nonsense. I bet you convinced her not to read my courtship proposal. You stole him from me and I will take everything from you! Including your brain. I’ll turn it into mush from crucio and cut your face open. You will no longer be pretty, you will no longer have a brain. What will you

have then? Huh?" Daphne's feral eyes made Hermione certain she wasn't lying. "Nothing. And no one will want you!"

"Aww," Hermione pouted, "you think I'm pretty." Daphne's mouth pursed tightly, but Hermione kept going. "You are mad at me because I'm better than you at playing the game better than you. I didn't have to pureblood to impress his family and friends, I didn't have to make a proposal for him to want me. You hate that I'm a muggleborn witch, but you hated more that I bested you and nothing you did scared me. And I have something you will never get to enjoy," Hermione grinned. "Draco married me."

Daphne's face fell, and her breathing changed. "You're lying!"

"We got married on Christmas. Another thing you'll never have?" Hermione said, a possessiveness flaring inside of her so wildly she could hardly control it, "Him loving you in return. You're so pathetic. He'll never return your feelings, but me? He worships me, he'll love me until he dies and you will never know what it's like to be loved by him. I don't give a fuck that he fucked you, but there is nothing better than knowing he has never loved you."

Daphne flinched before her hand rose, Hermione's eyes flared as the door swung open, Ron walked in, perfectly timed for Daphne to scream a slicing spell.

A burning sensation lanced across Hermione's face as Daphne cut across her temple, cheek, and lip. Hermione stumbled backward, falling to the floor, blood splattering everywhere. Daphne charged towards her unaware of Ron's presence. Goldstein leaped forward first tackling Daphne to the ground. Ron froze before he rushed to Hermione.

"What is going on?" Ron grabbed his wand, "I don't know how to heal this," he panicked. "I don't know, I don't know what to do." He was shaky as he held her face.

Goldstein placed Daphne into a body bind curse and moved towards them. Hermione's vision blurred as Goldstein lifted his wand, "I can do it."

He muttered the healing words as his wand ran along her cheek, suturing the deep cut and split lip. He handed her a pain relief potion. The relief of it was instantaneous, making Hermione gasp as she dropped the potion. The burning sensation ceased but she was still shaking from the ghosts of the attack.

Goldstein nodded, "You're okay, Granger, it's healing well." He held her stare before she suddenly jerked away from him, turning towards Ron, sobbing into his arms.

"Daphne wants to kill me," Hermione said, crying as loudly as she could. "She said she's going to kill me, Ron. I don't feel safe with her. You have to keep her away from me."

Ron rubbed Hermione's hair and she had to suppress her shudder at being so close to him.

After a few minutes, they stood. "Goldstein, take Daphne to her room, lock her inside, and take away her wand."

Ron nodded, "I'm sorry about Daphne." he looked genuinely sorry about her outburst.

"Ron, what happened to you?" Hermione found herself unexpectedly emotional. "What changed you?"

He shook his head, "Nothing changed me, Mione, I was just ready to be the chosen one. I wanted someone to choose me. Daphne did. Daphne chose me when I had nothing. I had less money than her, less connections. She believed in me when no one else would and I owe her for it."

Hermione didn't know what to say that wasn't an insult so she switched the topic entirely. Ron stood watch for an hour while Hermione explained step by step what she was doing as a sign of good faith.

"The potion is still very experimental. From what I can understand the potion it seems to attach itself to whatever emotion is strongest at the time of consumption, but it also has the tendency to create overly obsessive behaviors. Like for instance, if you experimented on an Azkaban guard and he had a tendency for violence and hatred towards women and possibly specifically muggle born witches. They might try to attack one." Hermione replied. "In order to create the best version, you'll want to test it out on a few people first so we can watch for the pesky rogue symptoms you've highlighted."

"Yeah, well if you hadn't been in Azkaban in the first place, perhaps it wouldn't have happened." Ron shrugged, "You can't ever take responsibility can you?"

"How is the Hogwarts student doing?" Hermione dared pushing her luck.

"He's fine. With his parents." Ron's mouth tightened. "I didn't use a cruiatus curse."

"Well now I know that, but his behavior is a prime example why you don't give out experimental potions to children or anyone for that matter. He was clearly being bullied and had strong negative feelings about himself." Hermione had to slow her speech in order not to sound so condescending. It didn't work.

"Shut the fuck up." Ron snapped. "We couldn't know what would happen, it worked for everyone else just fine. I'll send some people in here, just finish the potion."

"The antidote is ready," Hermione replied. "And the Loyalty potion is nearly done."

Ron straightened. "I told you to make the Loyalty potion, not the antidote. What have you been giving my men for the last three days?"

"The Loyalty potion." Hermione nodded. "The problems you've created also need a solution. I don't want any more Brotherhood members trying to cut out my uterus while I'm here." Hermione said flatly. "I'll be lucky if I have children in the future. So if I'm going to be walking around this place, I want to have some protection. Ergo, antidote."

"Azkaban also wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been sending McLaggen to places he shouldn't have been in." Ron replied.

Goldstein opened the door, "Polyjuice potion supply just arrived."

“When did we order more?” Ron said, frowning.

“I don’t know, maybe Daphne did. She’s been off lately.” Goldstein said. “They need your sign-off.”

Hermione nodded, adding, “Yeah, this is Polyjuice potion too.” Hermione nodded to a cauldron on the back of the large stove, “Daphne said she made it recently in fact.”

“Fine, I’ll send in Lucius and Draco first. Give them full doses of the Loyalty potion.” Ron muttered as he slammed the door.

Goldstein stalked behind her and Hermione froze.

“Stop it.” Hermione said, as his hand grabbed her hip. “Ron will see you.”

“I don’t fucking care.” he hissed. “I’ve been so patient. I’m losing my mind.”

“You should take some of this potion,” Hermione replied, turning and handing him a cup from the older cauldron, forcing his hand off of her.

He let his fingers slide against hers, dark eyes locked on her sutured face, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Daphne is easily ruffled by me, I knew what I was doing.” Hermione folded her arms over her chest, as she watched him drink. “Now, if you don’t behave yourself I’ll tell Ron where your loyalties lie,” Hermione said.

Goldstein rolled his eyes, “Please, he loves being told what to do, he’s weak.”

“What’s the latest update?” Hermione said as he set the empty cup down, grimacing.

“That tastes disgusting, like boiled cabbage and sneakers.” he wiped his mouth, “The latest update is your friends are safe with McLaggen and Lucius. Draco Malfoy,” he said the name slowly, “Is in a private room where Daphne visits from time to time. She usually just cries while he enjoys her fondling, Daphne’s been quarantined in her room now, effectively locked inside. Weasley will certainly let her out before this evening’s party. Zabini is waiting for the signal.”

“We need wands,” Hermione lowered her voice. “Doing this potion manually is draining and slow. And we need to find the location of the damn runic stones. If we can manage to turn them on the Brotherhood, it would give us the advantage we need.”

“I’m working on it.” Goldstein’s eyes dropped to the floor, then moved towards her again.

“You’re crossing lines again, Goldstein.” Hermione stared up at him as his arms moved on either side of her, caging her in against the counter. “And as you know. I’m a married woman.”

“He won’t mind.” He whispered with an arched brow. “Your speech was quite compelling, Granger. I’d like to worship you.”

"I think he minds very much. And I only have room for one follower." Hermione lifted her chin. "Besides you're incredibly ugly."

"Then close your eyes and think of your husband." He replied. "I bet he appreciates how beautiful you look when you're jealous."

Goldstein pushed away from her as the door opened.

"I am not supposed to be here!" Draco screamed, his entire body was tied down like that of an insane patient not allowed to use his limbs, "I'm not me. And there I am!" His eyes flared at the sight of Goldstein and Hermione. "You traitor! I mean I'm the traitor!"

Anthony Goldstein grunted, "Shut him up."

"Gladly," Marcus Flint grunted, "Silencio." Marcus placed both prisoners onto chained chairs.

"I think he's gone insane." Hermione sighed sadly looking at the screaming male before her.

Lucius glared at Hermione, he was also wrapped up without the use of his limbs "You Fluffernutter, what did you do to my son!" His head whipped towards Goldstein, "Get away from her you disgusting pig, I know what you were doing to the female prisoners in Azkaban!"

Goldstein frowned stepping in front of Hermione, "You can't make up your mind if you like her or not can you?"

Lucius snarled, "Get away from the Fluffernutter!"

"How about you mind your fucking business old man and stop getting involved in her life," Goldstein snarled back. Lucius's eyes narrowed on him.

"Can I leave now?" Flint sighed with boredom, "Weasley wants a bigger feast tonight, "More brotherhood members are coming tonight for the potions."

Hermione's stomach sank. She could not get this potion outside of this estate. "We need more time."

"Too bad, so sad, little mudblood." Flint moved towards Hermione. "You know what, maybe I'll stay instead, Goldstein needs to learn to share anyway, always hogging you at our parties. I'll show you a real good time darling."

Hermione gagged, "You're disgusting."

Goldstein stepped between them before Flint reached her. "I don't share." He pressed a wand against his chest. "Get out of here."

Flint muttered something under his breath before leaving. Goldstein exhaled sharply.

"Give Zabini the signal. Can you get a message to Harry and them?" Hermione whispered to him as she set up her supplies.

"Yes, if I must." He nodded.

"We have to act quickly tonight, if they find out before the potions wear off we will be in trouble."

"Daphne's suspicious." He whispered.

"Did she say anything?" Hermione's skin went cold.

"She's getting tired of the babbling curse." He said. "I'll be back. I'm locking you in here." As he passed by Lucius he punched him in the face without any warning.

Lucius' head snapped backward as blood trickled down his face. "That's what you get for interfering in her personal life." Goldstein didn't look behind him as he left.

"Do you enjoy making all the men around you miserable?" Lucius said, "Gods that hurt."

Hermione shrugged as Lucius stared at her in disbelief. "Drink this."

"At least clean the blood off my mouth." He sniffed.

"Say please, my dearest daughter-in-law." Hermione said sweetly.

"Please, my dearest daughter-in-law," Lucius' said just as mockingly.

Hermione frowned as she wiped his mouth, "Now say, "I love you Hermione."

"I hate you, Fluffernutter." Lucius said.

"Hmm. For some reason, I don't believe you." Hermione said, "Now drink." She held the cup up to his mouth.

"What was that?" Lucius said, "It tasted like water."

"Do you love me?" She arched a brow

Lucius grimaced, "Despite myself, I have grown accustomed to your presence because you're intelligent."

Hermione threw her head back in laughter as she headed towards Draco with a much thicker, chunkier potion. "Open wide." She said. He ate it like a child learning to eat solids for the first time, spitting it out halfway. While she scooped it back into his mouth, "Good job. Well done." Hermione said, cleaning up his mouth a little, with a spoon "Every last drop now."

Ron came back in suddenly and Hermione jumped.

"Daphne said she was sorry. I won't let her come to the party tonight though." He said greeting Draco with a frown. "Flint said he's not doing well."

"No, unfortunately, the babbling curse is quite severe," Hermione said, frowning. "I think his brain might have become impacted by it. He's half-way to insanity, I think."

"I'm surprised you're not on your knees begging for him to be released." Ron folded his arms.

"Well, I am just grateful to you, to know he's alive, and as long as that's the case, I'll cooperate."

"Why do you care for him so much if he wouldn't let you escape?" Ron replied as Goldstein walked back in.

"Draco's obsession with me was getting a little out of hand. So I asked for space and he said no. That's when I wrote you." Hermione said. "Too bad Daphne interfered with my letters to you. I don't accept her apology."

"She'd be a lot nicer to you if you wouldn't be so fucking rude to her." Ron rolled his eyes.

"Well, once, I believe it was you as Draco, you said, I'd have to choose between you and him. And I've chosen you, I just want his safety. I want Daphne's safety too, but perhaps you'll have to choose between her and I Ron." Hermione said.

Ron moved towards Draco where he was pleading silently with Ron. Ron sneered down at him, grabbing him by his neck. "Tonight's a big deal for me, so I'll only tell you this once." He looked back at Hermione, "If you want Malfoy kept alive, you cooperate. You may have the talent to make the potion but don't let that go to your head. You are not my Queen, Daphne is. And I choose her. You are not in charge in any capacity, you left me for a death eater and you'll be punished until I can trust you." Draco's face was an ugly shade of purple as he struggled to breathe.

"Okay!" Hermione snapped, "Let him go!"

Ron waited another long moment before releasing him. "Glad you understand."

Then he sighed, "Tonight you will give everyone the Loyalty potion and if things go well, I'll reward you with your very own bed."

Goldstein cleared his throat as entered, "Boss King, a few of the runic stones might be getting interfered with. With the arrival of so many guests the apparition wards can interfere with the patterns in their geometric-"

"I don't give a fuck!" Ron snapped, "Just fix it!"

"Gladly, is there anything else I can get you? A drink perhaps?" Goldstein moved towards a cupboard, pulling out a bottle of firewhisky, handing it to Hermione.

Leaning against the counter, he said, "Granger, fill up that cup."

She turned her back on Ron, her hands shook as she grabbed the cup, filling it with the liquor. This was so risky. "Do you think Daphne has given you any of the Loyalty potion

Ron," Hermione turned towards him. His brow was furrowed, "Never."

"Are you certain?" Goldstein chimed in, "She's been awful to Granger and more than anything, really disrespectful to you. I've heard a few people talking and it's-"

"What the fuck are they saying?" Ron moved towards them.

Goldstein shook his head, "Now you didn't hear this from me, but a few of them were wondering who actually runs this place. There is an order in the Brotherhood for a reason, but to see a witch so bluntly telling you what to do, our king of all people, it's confusing to them."

Ron swallowed. "She doesn't tell me what to do."

"Should I give you some antidote just in case?" Hermione said, her face full of concern, "It would only need to be a small amount to be effective."

"Only if you take it first," Ron sneered at Hermione.

Hermione nodded, "Certainly."

She added just a few drops of the antidote into the firewhisky, then added some into another cup.

Ron watched Hermione drink it before taking a sip of his own drink. "I don't feel any different."

"You might not notice right away," Hermione replied. "The next time you're around Daphne, see how you feel, ask her questions."

"How do you feel?" Ron asked, taking another sip of his drink.

"I feel multiple things at once, scared for the future, wishing I had my own bed. I miss my friends." Hermione spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. Her mouth was numb and tingling.

"If things go well, you can have your own room." Ron sighed.

"How are you feeling Boss King?" Goldstein watched him.

"Quite good. I feel excited to bring more men under my control and excited to rub it in my parents face." Ron said, then frowned chuckling, "Well, maybe I should give some of the Loyalty potion to my parents. I need write them a letter and invite them over."

Ron stepped towards Hermione, lifting her chin, "Thank you for all that you do. I appreciate you so much." Hermione's eyes went wide, fear flared up. He was so closed to her mouth.

"You're welcome." She said. "I'm glad to be here." Sweat trickled down her back as Ron's hand cupped her cheek, swiping across her face.

"I am sorry about Daphne, you know. She's a bitch sometimes." Ron chuckled again. Goldstein laughed a bit loudly and it had Ron turning towards him, "Has Goldstein been behaving himself?"

"Yes," Hermione said, her heart beat so fast as she clamped her mouth tight. Ron noticed as his eyes narrowed on her, "Are you lying?"

"No." Hermione breathed, "I'm just nervous. You make me nervous Ron, I don't feel safe with you so close, I'm sorry." The words blurted out of her.

Ron's jaw tightened as his hand slid to the base of her neck, gripping tightly and pulling her ear to his mouth, "Good. You should be scared. You should know who is in charge of you now." He shoved her away, making her fall to ground. Ron walked to the door, when Goldstein didn't move, he snapped at him. "Leave her there to work. She's fine."

The silencing charm on Draco ended and he screamed, "RON!"

Ron frowned, "Shut the fuck up Malfoy!"

Hermione pushed herself up from the floor. "Will you silence him before you leave, this would be much easier if I had a wand."

"Ron it's me!" Draco screamed, "I'm not supposed to be here!"

"He's clearly insane." Goldstein said flatly as finally moved towards the door.

Ron swished his wand and Draco was silenced again. Hermione let out a sigh of relief.

"Where are we going?" Goldstein asked Ron.

"For what?" Ron said, "I need to write a letter to my parents and tell them how I hate them for having so many kids."

"You were going to show me where the Runic stones were. They're messing with the apparition wards." Goldstein replied.

"Oh. Right." Ron nodded and then they left.

Hermione looked over at Lucius whose eyes were narrowed at her suspiciously. "Are you cheating on my son?"

"No." Hermione snapped. "I would never."

"You look quite comfortable with Goldstein."

"You are so fucking annoying. I'm so tired of trying to understand you." Hermione huffed as she began a new batch of the antidote. "Like seriously, I spent so much time with you, helping you, listening to you, and you know what? You are so fucking annoying. Your wife? She's great, your son? Amazing." Hermione smashed the mistletoe berries with anger. "You are an ungrateful," smash, "annoying," smash "bastard who constantly insults me and tried to

stop me from being happy!" She was screaming now, her anger and the truth effects of the antidote pouring out of her rapidly.

Lucius looked bored, "How my son puts up with you I'll never know."

"Well, he's insane now so it' doesn't matter!" Hermione said, her frustration still overflowing, swinging out an arm to the door Ron left through. "Daphne's fucking been stalking me because she blames me for stealing Draco away from her from before the war. A war her ancestors helped start. That you helped start."

Hermione couldn't stop herself from talking, not only because of the potion, but the dam inside her mind that was all things Draco was shredding apart, flooding her whole body. "How could I steal Draco from her? Stalk his family and friends and make sure she'd never have a chance with him? Now that would be fucking crazy. But I am not fucking crazy!" It felt good to say this all out loud. Being candid like this for her was so rare. so difficult. "Because Daphne Greengrass is actually fucking crazy. She's been toying with Draco and It's not even real!" Hermione shouted. "Do you know that your son has been stalking me?" She pointed at Draco, "Literally stalking me enough to save my life!"

Lucius rolled her eyes after he looked at Draco, who'd become silent in her tirade, watching her with wide eyes. "Right. I don't know what your plan is but it looks pretty bad from my perspective. Can you just tell me where the fuck my wife is?"

"She's with my father." Hermione snapped.

"What the fuck?" He shouted, "Why?"

"Because he is at the manor. It's the safest place for him to be at. No one can get through those wards. I haven't been stalking your son though, I've been the opposite of stalking him. Stalking his parents. His friends. I just wanted to know where he was! But then I became friends with you all and then all I could fucking think about is, where the fuck is Draco? Why was missing from society? Because he was never with you! Or Narcissa! Or any where with his fucking friends! No, he was somehow stalking me while I was worried sick he was dead in a ditch. I wanted him dead half the time because he took up so much space of my fucking brain. I have never thought of any one more than Draco fucking Malfoy."

"Are you fucking insane?" Lucius snapped.

"I don't know!" Hermione shrugged, in a whining reply, stabbing the soporiferous bean. "I'm ridiculous intelligent. I have an IQ that is 183. It blurs the lines between sanity and genius for me. Especially if you add on the fact that I am a witch and equally brilliant at magic. I'm the brightest witch of her age. They don't just call anyone that! I'm a fucking genius and do you know how insulting it was to my ego to realize I didn't know Draco Malfoy was stalking me! Do you realize how much of a turn on that was? To be intellectually turned on is-"

"Shut the fuck up!" Lucius said.

"To being bested like that.... I was being stubborn with him because he wanted to win. He wanted me to admit I was stalking him. But I wasn't. I was just trying to find him! He was

stalking me! I was hoping to casually bump into him. He's the one that sent me pictures of our one night stand! All I did was move across the street from his house on accident, it's not like I remembered subconsciously where he lived. That seems statistically impossible. But the thing is I think we might be soulmates. Like literally. It's going to change the magic society if I ever share my findings because we are quite literally a scientific discovery. And I still couldn't fucking find him after Azkaban...." Hermione trailed off. "He had to have known I was stalking him. He had to have known I was with his mother. There is no fucking way!" Hermione shook her head, "Do you think he knew? how could he not know?"

Lucius snarled. "You are actually crazy!"

"Crazy in love." Hermione cried as she chopped the beans, "He's the best person I know. He's my best friend. I miss him so much my heart hurts. So I think I'm going to let him kill Ron Weasley." Hermione sniffled, "He deserves. But here's the thing, I need you to know that I'm letting him. Because he's going to think he's the winner because he bested me, but he's not because I'm letting him win. I'm *letting* him. Do you hear me? You need to remember this moment so that you'll have my back. You will tell him that this is me letting him win. That and I think I'll just kill Daphne instead." As Hermione said the word she grew hot.

Her chest heaved sharply. She really wanted to kill her. But should she? Was it necessary? Hermione's morality was beginning to feel so frayed. She'd never killed anyone before. She was in love with her stalker well one of them at least. She was giving many people in this estate potions without their true consent, those people were downright awful though.

Her bravery and plan were feeling all shades of grey. Maybe even becoming dark magic in some ways. How far had they strayed from the war if her morality had only grown blurrier? If Ron was right, it means she might be the reason Draco was risking his life for her. This could all be her fault. Everything was being rushed. They needed more time. Hermione couldn't breathe. She couldn't catch her breath. Her chest squeezed painfully. She needed Draco and she couldn't have him. She glanced at his screaming face.

Everything was all wrong and she couldn't breathe.

"Breathe godsdamned you!" Lucius said, his anger was gone, replaced by genuine fear. "Breathe for love of Salazar! In through your nose, out through your mouth! Please breathe! You'll be the mother to my future heirs! Live godsdamned you Fluffternutter, I need you to live! You're the only one who tolerates me and I feel so lonely and secretly like when you visit and why am I fucking saying this to you! Please live! Live for Draco! Live for Pilly! Breathe!"

Hermione sucked in a shaky breath as she blinked at Lucius, as she was gasping for the breath.

"Keep going!" Lucius said, almost kindly. "Breathe!"

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed.

"In through you nose!"

This had to end. She sucked in a breathe. She was done. She exhaled slower this time. The plan had to move forward and Ron had to be stopped. Those brotherhood members needed to be stopped.

This would end tonight.

## Chapter 42

The music blared through all the hallways of the large countryside manor. It was a rare moment for Hermione to be alone in Daphne and Ron's room. Thankfully Daphne was still locked up in her private chambers still in a body bind curse.

Ron watched her dress from the corner of the room, nursing a glass of firewhisky, the price for allowing her to choose what to wear. The dress he'd tried to get her to wear was see-through and tiny. He'd agreed to changing it with his wand, but only if he got to watch her change. That was something he did often in their relationship she realized now. Giving her a false sense of choice when it was always manipulation or an ultimatum. There was no comparison between the way Draco loved her and the way Ron attempted to, even if they shared some commonalities, the distinct difference in *how* they chose to love her was shockingly comforting. Draco's obsession made him center her in his world, whereas Ron's desire came from only wanting to support his own selfishness.

Ron belched loudly, making Hermione frown.

"I'm going to head to the ballroom, you need to come out in the next ten minutes." Ron said, standing from his chair. "Your cooperation is obviously the only thing stopping me from killing Malfoy, and I could go another round with Potter if you want to push me, Hermione. You're to go out there and be the spokesperson of this potion, ensuring that each of these investors not only believes in it's efficacy, but is willing to invest in it entirely. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded and Ron left, leaving her alone.

Instantly her eyes began to water as she stared at herself in the mirror, she didn't stop the few tears from falling.

It was almost time to walk into a ballroom, wandless, with the highest thirty members of the brotherhood. Later in the evening more members were expected to arrive, to be wined and dined. They'd all begin bidding on a muggle-born witch or wizard.

Hermione felt weak and even somewhat embarrassed without her wand. Not having it made her pulse behave erratically, her chest ached, and her jaw was stiff. The risk of walking in that room felt so illogical that it was hard to take the step forward. Relying on her plan without a wand was a great risk of faith, in herself and Draco. Hermione was not ready to die, and she was ready to let her friends die, nor did she want to spend a single moment considering Draco dying. No, she wanted to live a long life, surrounded by her friends and family and perhaps have a child and teach them as many things as she possibly could and turn old and grey and make out with Draco anytime she pleased.

Hermione was no longer afraid of the risks of love, but she wished it wasn't when the risks of death were so imminent. It made her feel foolish for how long she took to accept Draco's love. Or obsession. Or worship. Whatever it was, the dark twisty thing between them, felt too

good to be true. To be loved that well and that fully was something she had dreamt of. Even though it took her longer than she wished, her love was worth fighting for.

Hot waves of rage that lapped up her throat, filling her wholly. Those tears were a small leak of her anger and it would fuel her through the rest of the evening. Her rage would carry her through each step of the plan. Her rage fed by the more powerful love she carried within her.

So with the depths of her love keeping her focused and the molten rage pushing her forward, she turned away from the mirror and headed into another war to defeat an ego driven, blood-supremacist wizard.

Anthony Goldstein was waiting halfway down the hall for her, a hard look on his face that only grew colder as she approached. He clamped a pair of handcuffs around her wrists. His jaw feathered before he spoke, “You look...upset.”

“Should I look happy?” Hermione flicked her brow.

“I suppose not.” His eyes dropped down her dress and back up to her. “You’re the greatest weapon hidden in plain sight.”

“Or it might be the hand gun you’re carrying.” Hermione’s eyes dropped to the gun at his waist. “How long have you had that?”

“Found it on your husband’s body.” He shrugged. “It’s been fun learning how to play with it.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes, “You could find the time to practice using a gun, but somehow couldn’t find a wand for me to use?”

“All’s fair in love and war.” Goldstein replied flatly. “Also Weasely’s been extremely tight lipped about your wands. I’ve tried.”

Hermione rolled her eyes as they stood before the double doors. “Well, I hope your ego doesn’t prevent us from winning this war.”

“With your plan, do you really need a wand?” Anthony’s tone turned quiet, a tremor of worry exposed in his question.

“I was told my plan is risky and I should have multiple backup options.” Hermione said, taking in another breath, squaring her shoulders.

“I have complete faith in your power, Granger.” Before she could respond, he pushed the doors open and a raucous of laughter died down as the Brotherhood wizards turned their way.

Hermione waited, centering the magic within her. Her dress, while form fitted around her bodice, began flowing around a dropped waistline dress, trailing slightly behind her. The cap sleeves were squared and stiff, angled to lift and curve off her shoulders. If she was going into battle, she’d dress like a general. The military inspired upper-half gave her the confidence boost necessary she’d need to command the room, her silver handcuffs around her

wrists gave Ron the illusion of control he wanted. He thought he had her. He thought he'd won. Men like Ron, could never consider than submission is a strategy of its own.

Anthony Goldstein was already halfway across the room, headed towards the table reserved for Ron's closest Brotherhood members before she could get herself to move, but every step she took made that fire inside her burn hotter.

The brotherhood members and their partners began whispering to one another, some snickering as she stopped in the center of the room.

Ron's cocky smile made his whole face glow with greed. "You see Brothers," He gestured from his tacky throne, "This is what loyalty gets you. I have told you time and time again, that if you have faith in my plan you would reap the rewards for your loyalty. And I know it's been a rough road, but as Minister of Magic, as the King of the wizarding community, and as the leader of the Brotherhood, I want you to know that I have paved this road by going first. I have borne the burdens to demonstrate how it's done. I believe I've outdone myself, considering I have in my possession and under my control, the most famous muggle born witch of all!" He flung his arm out and they all laughed, roaring from their chairs. "I promised that all of you would have a muggle born to serve you. Many questioned if it could be done, but it has. Not only have I made good on my promises, but I have proven to have tamed the wildest, muggle born witch that tried to destroy me and the Brotherhood's legacy. Not to mention, she came crawling back to me." He said and the whole room broke out in another round victorious laughter. "I could have stopped there and it would have been enough to prove myself as your faithful leader, but not only do I have Hermione Granger in the palm of my hand, but it is my honor to also share that I have captured those who attempted to support her."

A louder applause echoed through the room and Ron drank it up, his eyes and ego growing wider with every hollering cheer and whistle of pride. He glanced around the members celebrating the enslavement of her and her friends, "If you are present in this room, you are my most valuable, most loyal, and most courageous members of the Brotherhood. I'd like you all to give yourself a round of applause." The room grew unbearably loud. Whistles, shouts, and cheers thundered through Hermione's skull, but her eyes stayed on Ron. "To celebrate this milestone and the beginning of renewing our legacy, we will have a toast. Hermione, will you be a good muggle born and do us the honor of going first?" His voice turned patronizing.

"Of course, my king," Hermione nodded. The room was still buzzing with the heightened energy as younger brotherhood members, ones still struggling to get through puberty, brought out silver trays of champagne. Unbeknownst to the Brotherhood, it fizzed with alcohol and the loyalty potion and they passed around the glasses to everyone. Lastly, a glass was given to Hermione. Her chained wrists clanked loudly as the room's noise drew soft, the anticipation of Hermione's first sip lingering in the air.

She lifted her glass with two hands, "A toast," she smiled brightly and for the first time, turned to address the room, slowly making eye contact with as many as she could, "To loyalty, the chains that bind us all here tonight." Her words were clear and crisp, reverent. "How sweet it is to give up our control and to serve a greater cause than ourselves. Bound not

by choice, but by necessity.” She looked into Susan Bone’s eyes as she turned another quarter of the room, “For in the depths of our loyalty is where we sacrifice our own will and give into complete faith, trusting that our master, our glorious king, always knows what’s best. May we continue to give up our free will for the greater good, for this cause that gives us all purpose.” Hermione turned back to Ron, “Here is to those who know their place, let us drink to the loyalty that keeps us all in place, chained to the fate of our king’s rule, and united in the purpose of legacy. Long may our loyalty hold!” And she drank the whole glass.

Ron was deeply moved by her words and his eyes had turned heated, an infatuated look that Hermione hadn’t seen in a while. It was unsettling, but ultimately what she had hoped for. He held her eyes as he lifted his own glass of firewhisky.

The room’s energy had splintered slightly as they each followed the toast, Hermione remained in the center of the room as they each drank. A thread of unease had slivered through the room and Ron hardly noticed, but Hermione captured it, grasping onto it with her mental magic and the parts of the loyalty potion beginning to root in the audience.

“Now, lets feast! Let us reap the rewards of our labors!” Ron bellowed and the room relaxed enough for any discomfort to simmer on low. More alcohol was served, large amounts of food carried out by the hands of the young. Hermione stayed where she was, waiting for instructions. No one offered her food or another drink. Ron wanted to demonstrate his control over her and she wanted him to believe he could. Hermione chanced a glance at Goldstein, who was engaged in a conversation with Marcus Flint.

Hermione continued to delicately weave her web. Any time a wizard or witch glanced her way, she locked eyes with them, forging the bond of the loyalty potion to react to her. *Hermione Granger is your leader. Hermione Granger is the most powerful witch in this room.* And she started to see it, she saw the splintering confusion grow. A young male wizard began coughing, shaking his head, clearing his throat. He glanced at Hermione and she arched a brow, challenging his confusion. *Hermione Granger is your leader and you will behave.* Another older male shifted in his seat, wiping sweat from his brow. *Hermione Granger is who you're really loyal to. Hermione Granger is the only one with real power.* Her mind channeled through the air latching on to anyone’s confusion. So she continued to sow her seeds of doubt and pull at the threads of Ron’s portrayal of control, feeling the crack of power shift in her favor.

Half an hour later, when Hermione’s feet were beginning to grow tired, Ron announced more of his proof of dominion was arriving. Harry, Ginny, Cormac, Neville, and Pansy were marched in with chains around their wrists and ankles, different chains than Hermione had thanks to Goldstein. The crowd clapped louder for each one, until they were all stomping and cheering with overwhelming joy when Draco came in. He was still hung against the planks of wood, his mouth stuffed with a gag.

That’s when Hermione’s heart stuttered. Skipping a few beats. The applause was deafening, seeing Draco’s body carried in like a blood covered trophy made her sick. They’d all pay for this.

Each of her friends were displayed on the side of the room, like decorations. Harry’s face was mottled with bruises. Ginny’s eyes looked sunken in and gaunt. Neville was a mask of

indifference, even though he couldn't put his full weight on one leg. The look of feral anger on Pansy's only made the crowd laugh louder. Malfoy's head hung low, whimpering slightly through the mouth piece.

"Tonight we will auction off our extra prisoner's off as well." Ron said, with an actual giggle. "I believe these four," he gestured at everyone but Malfoy. "Will be of great use to the right couple or home. They might not be muggle born, but when my own blood, my youngest sibling, has betrayed me, there has to be an example set for those who don't understand who is in control!"

The crowd ate up his speech and Hermione began testing her the strength power then. She sent another wave into the air, weaving the threads of power of the loyalty potion. "*Is he as powerful as he seems? Or is this all an illusion? What has a Weasley ever done to prove themselves?*" She emphasized the term Weasley like Draco would say it and it made her smirk.

"I don't give handouts." Ron continued droning loving the sound of his own voice, "Loyalty is earned. Each of these betrayers can earn our forgiveness by serving one of the great families in this room for the next three decades. That way they will be able to learn what loyalty looks like from the best." Hermione pushed again, "*If he is as powerful as he claims, why does he need a loyalty potion?*"

One wizard gripped his glass so tightly his knuckles turned white. A couple of seconds later it snapped in half making the room halt to an awkward silence.

That's when Ron's smile faltered, seeing something, but still too proud to figure out what it was he saw. Everything was in place. He looked over Hermione, seeing the chains around her wrists, but not the weapon of her mind. He'd always underestimated her. He'd always thought he was smarter than her, even in school, even when they were lovers, he thought he was *better* than her, but now he'd die knowing he was always a loser.

"What about Malfoy?" Someone from behind Hermione shouted, "I'd like to make him earn a few lessons on respect!"

"We all do." Ron's voice turned cold. "Draco Malfoy is the one person I hate most in the world."

Draco stirred on the wood, lifting his head towards Ron with bloodshot eyes. "His mind is caught in a cyclical babbling curse, stuck in a loop of nonsense. It's quite entertaining to witness, so I'm going to let him become more insane and then I'll force him to watch me marry Hermione, then I'll force him to watch me breed her, and I'll force him to watch her bear my heirs, and he will be forced to suffer the greatest betrayal of all, watching the person you loved the most, be with the person you despise the most. He will get his punishment, for the rest of his life. He is my indentured servant. He is not for sale. But perhaps in the future, I'll rent him out." A dark chuckle wrapped around the room, led by Anthony Goldstein throwing his head back in laughter.

She pushed out her magic again, "*He's keeping Malfoy and Granger, he's disgusted by the mudblood, yet wishes to breed her? He's selfish for keeping Malfoy. Hermione Granger is the*

*most powerful witch in this room. You are to listen to every word she says."*

Hermione's stomach twisted in knots as a few of the wizards began looking more critically around the room, hoping they didn't throw a wand in her direction. She pulled harder on the connection, the threads of herself inside the loyalty potion binding her to those who heeded her words. The amount of power she was gathering was building steadily, more of their subconsciousness falling into her grasp. After constantly considering why Lucius was loyal to her, Hermione reasoned that whatever had been inside the loyalty potion when she first made it was, something inherently connected to Hermione. So she'd added her hair into every batch of it and a drop of her blood too, just to ensure she'd have reigns to steer a room of powerful wizards.

She tugged hard on the discomfort underlying the laughter in the room. If this potion fed on strong emotions, and if she could gain personal loyalty through the potion, she'd have her own army of Ron's party guests right under his nose. It was more exhausting than she expected though, considering how little she'd slept, how stressful the last few months had been. It took all of her power to concentrate on controlling the direction of at least half the room now. It wasn't mind control per say, but it was forced tunnel vision. Hermione remembered with bitterness how it felt to be so narrowly focused on the goals Ron set for her. The way he'd poisoned her with her own potion made her want to scream.

Anthony Goldstein stood up abruptly and made his way over to Ron, whispering something in his ear. Ron's face fell and he snapped an answer back. The crowd murmured in response.

"Seems like our wards are interfering with others arriving." Ron said.

Hermione's eyes met Goldstein's and she smirked. Their plan was working. Blaise and Theo had stopped the group of incoming brotherhood members, meaning they knew every person who had planned to bid on a muggle born.

"Ron!" Draco screamed. "Hermione is tricking you!"

The whole room froze as they turned to the prisoner hung on the planks of wood. All of her sympathy for him earlier flew out of the window.

"Ron, she's doing something to them!" He said. Hermione's heart plummeted to the floor as Ron stood. *Fuck*. That was not part of the plan. She didn't have enough control of the room for this. Goldstein moved forward, marching towards Draco, but he was stopped when another wizard clutched his head, groaning in pain, "I do feel weird." Another stood shaking with confusion and fear on his face.

Ron's eyes flicked with rage as they landed on Hermione, "What the hell is going on?"



## Chapter 43

Hermione shook her head. "I'm only here to serve you, my king." The fear in her voice was unfortunately real. "I've been standing here the entire time, wandless, how could have I done anything to interfere? I am but a simple muggle born, meek, and humble servant of *your plan.*"

Ron looked uncertain about how to proceed. Of course he did. He wasn't a true leader. He was a lazy pig. Goldstein hovered on the steps to the throne, danger pulsing in the air.

*"Laying it on a little thick aren't you?"* The sound of Draco's voice was exactly what she needed. The room was tense as the Brotherhood's suspicion grew. Hermione capitalized on it, using their confusion to her advantage. There was no time to waste, she threw out all her power, dragging her claws into them all.

"The potion is in effect." Hermione said, waving her chained hands towards the room. The brotherhood members and their wives began to realize they were the first to receive the potion intended to give them control over their muggle-born servants.

Ron's jaw tightened.

"Roooon!" Draco screamed interrupted them, making Hermione flinch at the sound of his voice that loud. "She's a fucking liar!"

"Well, it seems like it's working. His loyalty is to you." Hermione sighed. "I never thought I'd see the day."

*"You really need to improve your acting skills."* Draco said, his voice tense. He was nervous about the next few steps and so was she.

"Silencio." Ron snapped at Draco, his wand stayed elevated, waving it over the room. "As King, and as Minister of Magic, I have to test your loyalty. Now, all of you rise."

*"NO."* Hermione said immediately to the minds of room.

A few brotherhood members groaned. Several of them began to lift of their seats, but then froze a few inches off the chair, struggling to follow orders. Ron's breathing grew harsher, standing from this throne to his full height.

"All of you rise and respect me as your king!" He snarled.

*"NO."* Hermione repeated, watching Ron with determined silence. Half the room grabbed on to their heads, letting out anxious cries.

"Get up!" Ron said again. "Get up now!"

Hermione continued sinking into their minds as deep as she dared to go. "*Sit still, sit quietly. Don't move unless I allow it.*" None of them moved anymore.

Ron's realization that his control was gone was slow, as if he couldn't understand what happened.

"Flint." Hermione called to the male still sitting near Ron's throne. His head snapped towards Hermione, as she lifted her arms, "Can you grab that key ring off of Goldstein's belt and unlock my handcuffs."

Ron hesitated to speak, shock running through him like being splashed with cold water. Flint was already next Goldstein, who raised his hands as Flint grabbed the keys.

"Stop!" Ron screamed. "Flint do not listen to her! What is the meaning of this!"

Flint unlocked Hermione's handcuffs and she sighed loudly. "Those are incredibly painful to wear for hours."

Ron's face grew furious. "Hermione, what the fuck is going on? You have one second to explain-"

"Flint, go place those handcuffs on Ron's wrists." Flint began marching towards Ron.

"The fuck you will." Ron said, as he raised his wand and sent a stinging hex straight to his chest.

Flint cried out in pain, stumbling backwards, but still attempted to move towards Ron. Ron sent out a body bind curse, forcing Flint to fall on the floor.

"He doesn't seem to care what happens to any of you." Hermione spoke to the crowd, "Please rise from your seats." All of them stood, some faster than others. And Ron looked murderous.

"What have you done Hermione!" Ron screamed. "You are loyal to me! I am the king! I am the minister! I am the chosen one!" The thick veins in his neck were bulging, and the strength of Ron's emotional connection to many of the Brotherhood members began to pull on her grip over them. She could feel it like a tug of war. They grew restless, their minds disliking the volley of power between them.

She pulled back harshly, feeling the weight of their combined power flood the room. "If you keep trying to control them, while I'm already in control. You will destroy their minds. Their minds could turn into soup for all I care," she said. "If you want your loyalist in tact, you will take off their chains Ron." She nodded towards her friends. Her request needed to be reasonable in comparison.

Ron gripped his wand, weighing the costs of losing his most loyal brotherhood members and taking off the chains of his prisoners.

Hermione pleaded, "Please, I just want my friends safe, after that I will let you have the reigns of control. I will teach you how to do it like I can."

He was always a jealous person and her offer struck true. Ron swished his wand and the chains fell off their limbs.

"All of the members of the Brotherhood are to march out of this room and into the formal dinning room down the hall." Hermione said, "Tell them. Take the reigns. Force them out of here." Hermione waited until that moment to throw her magic in to Ron's mind. To attempt to direct his attention where she wanted it to be. It didn't sink the way she felt the others. Ron's mind was more protected than she anticipated, but something of her power landed, a shred that latched to whatever part of him was under the influence of the loyalty potion and the emotional connection they shared.

*You're still in control, don't let them see you so embarrassed. Show them you're still in charge. Punish her in private.*

Ron's cheeks burned red, "Leave the room. Let me deal with the mudblood's interference privately." Hermione flinched. She'd never heard Ron use that word towards her and it hurt more than she realized.

The brotherhood members marched out of the room, until it was just Flint on the floor, while Goldstein and Ron stood on the platform of his throne. Hermione waited for Ron to question why Anthony wasn't following orders, but they were interrupted by Draco's wailing voice.

"Roooon!" The silence charm had worn off.

"Ron!" Draco's muffled, sputtered cry made Hermione freeze. She swung her head to Draco. "Don't listen to her, Ron! She's lying. That's not me!" He screamed.

Ron glanced between Draco and Hermione. Hermione shook her head, "He's clearly insane!"

Anthony Goldstein pulled out his gun and shot Draco in the kneecap. Ron snapped his head towards Anthony. "What did fuck did you do that for, I didn't give you permission, you imbecile!" Goldstein cast a muffling spell over Draco's screaming. Their friends were all in shock, their faces draining of color. Pansy choked back tears.

"I couldn't let him screw up the ending now could I?" Goldstein grinned wickedly.

"Huh?" Ron said, confusion lining his entire face. "What the fuck are you talking about?" Ron raised his wand towards Anthony in a warning, but everyone froze as Freddie Mercury's voice filled the room in a vibrating wave.

**"TONIGHT I'M GONNA HAVE MYSELF A REAL GOOD TIME."**

"What the fuck is that?" Ron spat, jerking his head from side to side searching for the source of the noise.

"Stand back," Anthony put up a cautionary hand towards Ron and descended down the throne's steps. Ron moved backward, hunching his shoulders, looking around suspiciously, grabbing the arms of his throne.

Holding a hand to his ear, Goldstein said loudly walking straight towards Hermione, "Ah yes, it's Queen. Don't Stop Me Now."

"What?" Ron's eyes widened in fear as the volume of the music continued to increase, "The Queen of England? Which Queen"

Goldstein began moving his hips to the beat, swaying as he moved around Hermione. Such a drama king.

Harry and Neville's' mouth fell open. Pansy blinked away her tears.

And as Freddy Mercury sang, "*I'm burning through the sky, yeah!*" Anthony Goldstein transformed into Draco Malfoy before everyone's eyes.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Ron charged forward with his wand held high.

But in one perfectly choreographed spin, Draco, while lip-syncing to Queen's anthem, "I'm having such a good time, I'm having a ball!" Swung around with his gun, shooting Ron in the hand, blasting his fingers and wand to bits. "No more wand for you!" Draco said.

"*If you wanna have a good time, just give me a call!*" Draco continued dancing, waving his hands, high and low. Ron screamed hysterically clutching the partially blown off limb as blood sprayed erratically. Draco's hands swished with the rhythm. He moved to the beat with seamless synchronicity, dancing sideways to face Hermione mouthing the words, "*I'm a sex-machine, ready to reload!*" while putting an L shape against his forehead. Hermione snorted. Gods she loved him. With a quick step-ball-change, Draco spun again, shooting Ron in the foot causing him to drop backwards in a helpless slump against his throne. Draco zig-zagged across the floor, arms splaying wide, cocky swagger on full display.

Cormac let out a hearty laugh.

Harry whistled loudly as Draco hip-thrusted his way towards Ron singing, "*Don't stop me! Don't stop me! Don't stop me!* Wile s hooting him in the stomach, the shoulder, and thigh in tandem to the lyrics. Draco continued lip syncing, "I like it! Have a good time, good time!"

Then he paused for several long moments to dramatically play the air guitar, spinning a few times and dropping to his knees briefly. He spun back up and took his time dancing his way up the stairs, swinging his hips, shimmying his shoulders, and bobbing his head. Ron's eyes met Hermione's yelling her name with wild terror. "Please! Please Mione!"

Hermione gave him a little finger-wave goodbye. "Checkmate." She replied.

Ron's pants became visibly wet as Draco danced closer to him.

Draco sang, "I'm having such a good good time! I'm having a ball" And with a swish of his wand, Draco levitated Ron onto the throne with a wet thud. Draco stood directly in front of Ron, singing the last few lines to his face, "I don't want to stop at all!"

Hermione could see Draco's profile as he smiled wide. Hermione had never seen him more ecstatic than at that moment. It might have rivaled their wedding day.

And as the song came to a winding end, Draco released a satisfied sigh, "This is truly the best day of my life."

The song replayed at full volume.

*"TONIGHT I'M GONNA HAVE MYSELF A REAL GOOD TIME."*

And Draco lifted his gun, pressing it directly to Ron's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

The echoed ring of the gunshot in the room and the pounding music distracted them from the door opening.

Hermione was seconds away from running towards Draco, when her head was violently pulled backwards, hair gripped tightly as a wand pressed deeply into her temple.

"Are you ready to die, Granger?" Daphne's breath was filled with alcohol, but not the kind Hermione had spiked with loyalty potion.

And it was the look on Draco's face as he turned around that made her heart shatter.

# Chapter 44

## Chapter Summary

Thank you all for your patience, encouragement, and kind words!!!

Draco's heart raced as he spun around, ready to finally hold his wife and whisk her far away from this awful place. His smile crumbled in an instant as he felt his blood drain from his body, going numb. Feeling completely frozen at the sight.

Daphne Greengrass held a wand to Hermione's head. Her eyes were wild in a way that told Draco she was dangerous. Not taking her eyes off him, she said, "If you want her alive you will toss your wand on the floor."

He hesitated weighing his options, but the look in Daphne's eyes made it clear she was not bluffing. His wand clattered just a few steps away from Daphne. He'd seen Hermione in danger too many times now, but this made him feel completely powerless.

Daphne nodded with a smug smile at his cooperation. "Everyone else on the ground where I can see you! On your knees!" Harry hesitated, but a hissing sound from Hermione had them all kneeling to the floor. "Arms behind your heads."

They all obeyed. They all knew the risks were high. Terror flooded Draco's body as Hermione's voice swirled into his mind. *I love you, I'll always love you.*

"Did you think Ron created this alone? Do you not realize how much I have done to make this possible?" Daphne spat, pulling Hermione farther away from him.

"Of course not," Draco said carefully, stepping forward a few steps. "You're brilliant, Daph."

"Yes, I am. More brilliant than your little mudblood whore. Don't you dare come closer Malfoy." Daphne's smile was feral, she was manic. Daphne's wand pressed harder into Hermione's neck making her squeeze her eyes shut in pain.

Draco inhaled sharply, "What do you want Daphne?"

Her eyes widened, partially offended and his chest tightened. "What did you call me the night you were released from Azkaban, Draco? What was it you whispered in my ear? I think it's clear what I want."

He barely remembered that day at all. They'd been drunk, he could have said anything.

“I’ll give you whatever you want, if you just let her go.” Draco could only hear his roaring pulse thudding in his ears. He couldn’t look at Hermione yet, he needed Daphne to stay focused on him. Cormac grunted, losing balance slightly as he tried to keep his hands up. Draco had never hated Daphne more than he did in this moment.

“If anyone touches me she dies.” She snapped, pressing the wand down Hermione’s neck, causing her to whimper. “I have done everything for you” Daphne said, with a look in her eyes that made him feel like everything was completely out of control. She was supposed to be in that body bind curse. Daphne wasn’t supposed to be here. “I have tried to rebuild what we lost. I have tried to give you what you deserve. A throne, power, and control.” Her eyes filled with tears now, “I want you Draco. I have worked so hard to show you how much you can have with me. Why isn’t that enough for you? Why have I had to degrade myself to even get your attention? That throne is yours! I am here to give you the throne Draco!”

“None of those things mean anything without love Daphne,” Draco said. “And nothing matters to me if Hermione is harmed.”

Daphne bared her teeth wide and feral, as tears fell down her eyes, “You keep saying the wrong things! I am better than her! I am the one you’re meant to be with!” Her wand shook against Hermione’s pulsing neck. Draco’s eyes slid to Hermione’s for the first time, her golden eyes were filled with fear she couldn’t hide, her chest shook.

*I love you.* She’d been repeating it the entire time. Draco had to ignore it, he wouldn’t let this be their goodbye.

Draco took a tentative step forward, “Let her go and you can have me.”

Daphne inhaled sharply, “Get on your knees.” She tugged Hermione backwards with her.

“Okay, Okay.” Draco said softly, as he bent down to the floor. “I’ll do whatever you want, you can have me. Just, let her go. Please.”

Daphne grinned, her eyes filling with a sense of satisfaction at being able to force Draco to bend to her will. He’d do anything, literally anything to get Hermione away from her.

“Now, let her go.” Draco said. “Let Hermione-”

“McLaggen!” She snapped, not taking her eyes off Draco’s for one second.

“Yes, my queen?” McLaggen said.

“Kneel next to him.” Daphne pulled her wand on McLaggen, directing him. McLaggen kneeled beside him and Draco’s chest felt heavy with fear.

Hermione stiffened in Daphne’s hold, and Daphne dug her fingernails into Hermione’s arm. McLaggen glanced at Hermione with a faint, bitter smile on his lips.

“Don’t struggle, you stupid mudblood.” Daphne chided, pressing the tip of her wand back into the column of Hermione’s throat, before turning her attention back to Cormac. “You betrayed me, McLaggen. You are a lying filthy thing just like her. Any last words?”

"No, don't—" Hermione choked out a sound of pure pain.

"It's been a privledge, Granger." McLaggen's voice was shaking, but he held his head high.  
"Take care of my gran, please."

Daphne frowned, "How pathetically noble." A green light flashed.

"Avada Kedavra!" Daphne's rage sent a bolt of magic flying across the room in a half a second. No time to react. No time to think of a plan to protect him. Draco barely registered the blast before McLaggen dropped face first onto the floor next to him. Draco's body went cold. Icy fear soaked his skin as sweat trickled down his neck. The happy look on Daphne's face contrasted in horror with the devastation on Hermione's.

"In case you needed a reminder that I'm no fool to be messed with. You may have been able to trick Ron," Daphne said. "But you cannot try to trick me."

"I'm taking you very seriously." Draco replied. "I will give you anything. I'll hand over the keys to my manor. I'll empty my vaults. What do you want? I'm at your disposal."

"I want you to take the loyalty potion." Daphne said, her tone filled with urgency. Draco's eyes went wide, heart thudding harshly against his chest.

"Accio loyalty potion!"

A bottle whizzed through the air, landing down on the floor in front of him.

"You are going to drink every single drop. You are going to be completely and fully loyal to me. You will love me like I deserve to be. All of your thoughts, all of your willpower, you will be mine. You'll be bound to me forever and when the bottle is finished you'll, you'll..." Daphne's breathing increased. "You'll take me somewhere far away. Somewhere safe and we'll be together. Just you and I." Hermione began to struggle in her arms again, but Draco shook his head at her.

"Stop fucking moving you little nasty scum." Daphne's wand began to glow. "Don't make this harder than it should be. You want me to start torturing Draco? I'm not above that." Hermione stopped, whimpering in defeat.

Draco nodded, hesitating, searching his mind for an alternative. "Anything you want. You're the queen." He picked up the bottle, "Let her go first."

"No. Drink it." Daphne gritted out. "Drink it now!"

*I love you, I love you, I love you.* Hermione's voice chanted inside his mind. No, this would not be how he said goodbye, this would not be the end. *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

"Drink it or I swear I will kill her next Draco!" Daphne's voice seethed with anger. "Ron liked to play with all of you because he liked being in charge, but I'm not like that, I like efficiency. I want her dead." Daphne's eyes darkened and Draco's knuckles went white around the bottle. Waiting for a miracle, waiting for an interruption. Anything to distract her from the choices that laid before him. It felt too final. He looked at Hermione, forcing all of

the small details of her face into memory again. No potion would ever be able to replace what he felt for her.

“Drink it! Drink it!” Daphne screamed beside Hermione’s ear, making her flinch. For the first time he didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know the consequences of drinking the potion, but he couldn’t care, he needed Hermione alive.

His throat bobbed as he pulled the topper off and pressed it to his lips, hesitating slightly before tipping it back and swallowing it all. It tasted... wrong... he blinked, frowning with confusion.

“Tell me you love me.” Daphne demanded immediately, her eyes filled with a hopeful expression. “Tell me you’re mine.”

“He’s mine, you bitch!” Hermione spat, as she reared her head forward and struck Daphne hard with the back of her head. Daphne stumbled backward releasing her hold on her, crying out in pain.

Hermione dove to the floor grabbing Draco’s wand, and rolled around the ground, his wand aimed at Daphne.

“Did he say my name when he fucked you, Daphne?” Hermione snarled, her limbs shaking as she spoke. Daphne’s face twisted in anger as blood trickled from her nose.

“Is that what made you so miserable?” Hermione taunted. “So pathetic? So utterly obsessed with me?” Hermione grinned and Draco stared at her in awe.

Daphne lunged forward, screaming with razor sharp rage, her wand aimed at Hermione.

“Crucio!”

Daphne's mouth fell open as she stiffened, dropping like a stone to the floor. Twitching with a writhing scream, her body contorted arching on the ground for a moment before anyone dared to move.

Harry was up first, then quickly followed by Neville as they rushed towards Daphne’s body.

Hermione watched Daphne struggle to breathe, waiting for several moments before ending the curse, making Daphne’s body collapse in a motionless heap.

Draco crawled towards Hermione, scrambling towards her, trying to catch his breath. He needed to touch her. He needed to feel her heartbeat. He needed to know she was really alive, really safe again.

Hermione moved towards him with the same desperation, it had been so long since they were truly together.

“You’re okay, you’re okay,” Hermione said, grabbing his face.

He wrapped himself around her, feeling her shake in his arms. “I love you. I love you. I love you. I-” He pulled away cradling her face in his hands. “ I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t let it be goodbye. I thought I was losing you.”

“It wasn’t goodbye, I needed your wand.” Hermione said, running her hands down his neck and shoulders , “I didn’t want it to reject me in a moment of panic.” Hermione glanced to the empty potion bottle next to them. “How do you feel?”

“The potion… it tasted like you.” Draco, held her face, brushing her cheeks.

Hermione hummed, tilting her head, “Huh, that’s funny.”

Draco leaned his forehead against hers. “Hermione, what have you been doing in that workroom?”

Hermione sighed, a small smirk on her face, finally confessing, “I may have been dabbling in blood magic.”

The sound of marching boots echoed down the halls, “Reinforcements are here.” Harry said.

“So you only have yourself to blame for my obsession with you.” Draco said, pressing his lips to hers in the sweetest kiss they’d ever shared.

# Epilogue

## Chapter Summary

and now this journey is complete :) thank you, thank you, thank you!

## Chapter Notes

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

### Epilogue.

Six months later

After the international agencies arrived at the estate, they apprehended all conspirators, who confessed quickly to their participation thanks to the truth serum effect of the loyalty potion. Daphne confessed to the plan to work together with Ron to stalk and kidnap Draco and Hermione. Blaise, Harry, and Draco had already found enough evidence for the courts to take over. Hermione and their group of her friends had sent multiple letters and floo calls to the international magical agencies beforehand pleading for help as part of their plan, but it took them much too long to interfere in Hermione's opinion.

Daphne and Lucius were taken to Azkaban.

Harry's job at the DMLE was restored and within a few weeks he hired Blaise and tried to get Draco to take a job, but he refused it.

"I am a full-time bodyguard now." Draco said to him, lifting his wedding ring.

Hermione was still shocked by Draco's wedding gift. A few weeks after they escaped from the estate, dealt with the ministry trying to re-organize itself and elect a new minister, he whisked her away for a honeymoon, where they spent their days on a sandy beach, their evenings in a private pool, and their nights tangled in each other's arms reading books and watching movies. It was perfect. Hermione didn't think it could get any better.

Until he said, "I want to give you a new project. A gift so that you never question my loyalty or trust in you." Draco handed her a thick file. "Here."

As she read the contract, she started to cry. "How did you do this?"

"I have friends in the ministry now, it's only partial ownership, about forty percent, but it's yours to direct and improve. I have a vault already set up so all of your research is funded.

Your ideas are worth pursuing. You want to help make the place a better world and the ideas in your book are going to do it. Plus you'll need a bodyguard."

Draco had purchased Azkaban for her.

Since then, she'd re-trained staff, written new handbooks, guidelines, and training materials. Lucius pretended to be enraged for about three minutes before he began to weep when he was allowed to be released for good behavior, with community service for the rest of his life. Hermione still played catch with him at the manor and they were going to celebrate his college graduation next month.

"Time to play catch," she said as she strolled into one of the sitting rooms he liked to hide in.

Lucius glared at her, "You are enjoying this too much." He still obeyed though. Hermione believed Lucius liked to be told what to do. There was a reason he followed Voldemort, there was a reason he was a follower and not a leader. Hermione also knew that Lucius liked that Hermione wouldn't hurt him, just bruise his ego from being loyal to her and caring about her.

They tossed the familiar ball back and forth, "I do enjoy it." Hermione grinned. She kept him on a long leash, hardly intervening in his decision making processes. It was the knowledge of the loyalty potion that allowed her to convince Draco he should come home. Mostly it was a gift to Narcissa, who had never been happier and Lucius understood that too.

Draco still didn't trust his father, but they were working on speaking in normal conversations and not simply glaring at each other across the table at dinner.

Narcissa and Hermione created a non-profit organization that coordinated with St. Mungos to allow medical students to volunteer their services for Azkaban prisoners. Which meant she worked regularly with Narcissa. And Pansy too, the prison had a reputation to rebuild after all.

Going to work had never felt better. Draco landed his dream job—spending every moment with Hermione. And Hermione found hers—working alongside Draco, solving magical mysteries and improving the wizarding world, rehabilitating one challenging prisoner at a time.

Hermione walked into the prisoner's room, Draco veiled in a notice-me-not-charm.

She sat down at the table, "Get up."

The prisoner begrudgingly got up from their bed, chains clanking on the ground as they sat across from Hermione, hatred beaming from the prisoner's eyes.

"How are you Daphne?" Hermione asked, watching the small muscles in her jaw flutter.

"I hate you." She replied.

Hermione noted that in her log. "Alright shall we begin?"

Hermione passed her the loyalty potion. “Drink it all, I want to know how long this one lasts.”

Later that week Hermione laid down all the too-familiar leather couch, in Harry’s office that was almost all packed up now. The spider-like web of cracks in the ceiling had grown, splintering outward like a claw.

The door swung open and Harry popped his head in, “You ready?”

“Yeah,” Hermione said, a sad smile on her lips.

Harry debuted as the new Minister of Magic last month and little did he know Theo was going to propose to him tonight. But first, they were all gathering to unveil the Cormac McLaggen Memorial and give his gran an Order of Merlin in his honor. It still made her cry to this day, the guilt of it, the heaviness of getting him involved. But she was working on not blaming herself for others' mistakes.

“Where’s my wife?” Draco’s voice called behind Harry.

“I was just taking a break from all the packing.” She stood up as Draco brushed past Harry to grab Hermione’s hand. She never got tired of looking at those eyes.

Ginny followed in with Pansy in tow. They’d officially been dating for four months now. Pansy had become the best Quidditch girlfriend, cheering wildly at every game. She still didn’t know any of the rules, but she was unfathomably loyal to Ginny and they were madly in love.

Blaise and Theo followed in after.

“Thank you, Granger,” Blaise tapped the last box. It was his office now. He was the newest head of the DMLE.

“That’s what friends are for.” She smiled.

“Is everyone ready?” Theo said.

They all filed out of the room but she paused.

“Wait.” Hermione pulled out her wand and with a swish, the small cracks and crevices of the ceiling seamlessly filled in. And a sense of comfort enveloped her. She didn’t feel broken anymore, perhaps, she never was. Hermione had everything she could hope for. Friendship, honesty, loyalty, and love.

Draco squeezed her hand as they left the office, following a few steps behind their friends.

“Truth or dare,” Draco whispered.

“Really?” Hermione replied.

“Truth or dare, wife?” Draco repeated.

“Dare,” Hermione smirked.

“I dare you to tell me what you have planned for my birthday.”

Hermione replied. “I have a birthday present for you and that’s all you need to know. You don’t get to find out early.”

Draco sighed dramatically. “Just give me a hint.”

Hermione chuckled. “You’re going to be obsessed.”

She was whisking him away to Paris for his birthday as a do-over for last year, with breakfast reservations at his favorite restaurant where she’d tell him she was pregnant.

Hermione couldn’t wait to watch his obsession grow.

## Chapter End Notes

Wow, what a journey this has been. Thank you to everyone who read this along the way. Thank you to new readers who are finding it after its complete. Your comments fed me during times of writers block and inspired as I wrote. This was the greatest creative writing experience. I have more stories up my sleeves.

I appreciate you all so much!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!