

## House Pet

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/38484064) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/38484064>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warnings:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a> , <a href="#">Rape/Non-Con</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Hermione Granger/Original Male Character(s)</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Hermione Granger</a> , <a href="#">Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Theodore Nott</a> , <a href="#">Original Characters</a> , <a href="#">Harry Potter</a> , <a href="#">Ron Weasley</a> , <a href="#">Lucius Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Katie Bell</a> , <a href="#">Dean Thomas</a> , <a href="#">Justin Finch-Fletchley</a> , <a href="#">Charlie Weasley</a> , <a href="#">Blaise Zabini</a> , <a href="#">Bellatrix Black Lestrange</a> , <a href="#">Severus Snape</a> , <a href="#">Luna Lovegood</a> , <a href="#">Lavender Brown</a> , <a href="#">Pansy Parkinson</a> , <a href="#">Lily Evans Potter</a> , <a href="#">Viktor Krum</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">The Prince of Egypt</a> , <a href="#">Fertility Issues</a> , <a href="#">Wandless Magic (Harry Potter)</a> , <a href="#">Dark Magic</a> , <a href="#">BAMF Hermione Granger</a> , <a href="#">Clever Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Shared First Times</a> , <a href="#">Obsessive Behavior</a> , <a href="#">Forced Cohabitation</a> , <a href="#">Blood Magic (Harry Potter)</a> , <a href="#">Destroy the World Draco</a> , <a href="#">Competition for Witch</a> , <a href="#">Loveable Theo Nott</a> , <a href="#">Brainwashing</a> , <a href="#">Dark Magic Rituals (Harry Potter)</a> , <a href="#">Torture</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe</a> , <a href="#">Coming of Age</a> , <a href="#">Handmaid's Tale themes</a> , <a href="#">Grooming</a> , <a href="#">Loss of Virginity</a> , <a href="#">Loss of Innocence</a> , <a href="#">Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Dubious Consent</a> , <a href="#">Vaginal Sex</a> , <a href="#">Oral Sex</a> , <a href="#">Masturbation</a> , <a href="#">Suicide</a> , <a href="#">Domestic Violence</a> , <a href="#">DV not from Draco</a> , <a href="#">War</a> , <a href="#">Attempted Sexual Assault</a> , <a href="#">Kidnapping</a> , <a href="#">unethical use of Polyjuice Potion</a> , <a href="#">Hermione Granger-centric</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Dramione endgame</a> , <a href="#">Miscarriage (not Hermione)</a> , <a href="#">stillbirth (not Hermione/ in a memory)</a> , <a href="#">Grief/Mourning</a> , <a href="#">vengeance</a> , <a href="#">Unreliable Narrator</a> , <a href="#">The Dove's Not Dead But It's on Life Support</a>
Language:	<a href="#">English</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Drown me in this fic I'll die happy</a> , <a href="#">WIP Dramione Masterlist</a> , <a href="#">ultimate dramione rereads</a> , <a href="#">I want to read this ... but it's a WIP</a> , <a href="#">Dramionie Comfort Reads</a> , <a href="#">Accio_WIPs</a> , <a href="#">WIP I'm waiting 🥺💔</a> , <a href="#">Draco's best moments</a> , <a href="#">Dramione WIPs that I'm whipped for</a> , <a href="#">krakengirl's top tier favs of all time</a> , <a href="#">hp fics I would die for</a> , <a href="#">Alaskas_Dramione_WIPs</a> , <a href="#">Fics I Must Read ASAP</a> , <a href="#">Dramione WIP's</a> , <a href="#">just absolutely brilliant pieces of work</a> , <a href="#">🌟 the treasure trove of jeuel 🌟</a> , <a href="#">Elite Dramione</a> , <a href="#">A_Listers</a> , <a href="#">Ongoing fic</a> , <a href="#">💎 HP Fav: Dramione 💎</a> , <a href="#">Dramione fics 💕💕💕💕</a> , <a href="#">Witches burn bridges</a> , <a href="#">Top Shelf Firewhisky Dramione</a> , <a href="#">Alysoun's TBR Pile</a> , <a href="#">Dramione</a> , <a href="#">Best Harry Potter Fics and fave stories from other fandoms</a> , <a href="#">Hermione Granger-centric fanfics</a> , <a href="#">Draco Malfoy-centric HP Fics</a> , <a href="#">Dystopian</a> , <a href="#">post-apocalyptic</a> , <a href="#">Voldemort Wins AU</a> ; and other dark AU <a href="#">Harry Potter fics</a> , <a href="#">Interesting Fics To Read 🧐</a> , <a href="#">Lissa's favourite dramiones</a> , <a href="#">HJG crème de la crème 🍰</a> , <a href="#">Dramione Gems 💎💍</a> , <a href="#">ForeverFavesThatMakeMeGoArgh</a>

Stats:

Published: 2022-04-19 Updated: 2025-09-06 Words: 417,819 Chapters:  
57/65

# House Pet

by [NinaBinaBallerina](#)

## Summary

After a dark curse, the wizarding world is left barren. Facing extinction, the Purebloods subjugate the muggles, searching for the rare muggleborns—the only witches able to reproduce.

Raised in the Nott household as a pampered pet, Hermione is forced to enter the Trials as she comes of age—a competition created for pureblood wizards to claim a breeder. Determined to win her, Draco Malfoy only knew two things: she belonged to him, and he'd destroy anyone who tried to take her.

But the cries of the enslaved muggles pierce through Hermione's comfortable life, causing her to reexamine everything she thought she knew about her world and the people in it. She soon discovers that the ancient call of magic and vengeance cannot be denied.

Plot inspired by the Prince of Egypt, with themes from the Handmaid's Tale.

## Notes

Edited by the lovely MyPrivateInsanity

Update Schedule: Every Sunday, except for family events and vacations, which I will inform you about ahead of time.

Song Suggestion: The Prince of Egypt Soundtrack- “Deliver Us”

If you want to have a feel for the last half of the story, listen to “The Plagues” on the same soundtrack.

Important information before we begin:

- Dumbledore killed Voldemort during the first war, but the Death Eaters won anyway.
- Injured from his duel with Voldemort, Dumbledore gave his life to curse the wizarding population with infertility, intending to wipe them out.
- The unintended magical loophole—Purebloods and halfbloods can only reproduce with muggleborns.
- To avoid extinction, the purebloods kidnap the muggleborns at first sign of accidental magic. They are then raised in pureblood households until they are adults and forced to participate in the Trials—a competition where wizards vie for the right to continue their

lineage with the muggleborn.

- The entire muggle populations of Europe and Asia are subjugated, and they are punished if they try to conceal muggleborns.
- I created a new character named Titus Nott (Theo's older brother). He's sixteen in the first chapter.

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: [House Pet | Tradução](#) by [ficsbystar](#)
- Translation into Polski available: [\[T\] House Pet \[PL\]](#) by [Charlotte\\_vanilla](#)

# Chapter 1: A Powerful Muggleborn

Cover Art by [Nurchie](#)



The screams woke Hermione.

She slipped out of her bed, holding her stuffed bunny, Hopper, and watched from the window as the monsters walked down the street in billowing capes and skull masks. Light spewed from sticks dangling from their fingers, so bright it ignited the night sky. The dark figures walked in and out of the houses, fading into the twilight. Soon after, the world outside

erupted into colors: green and red, like Christmas lights. One neighbor walked outside with an old hunting rifle and aimed, but a neon green light hit him in the chest, and he crumpled over.

"Oh God, they're here," her father said outside her door. "We need to leave. The Order assured us they concealed her accidental magic."

"I don't think they're here to take Hermione. They must know of our involvement in the last attack. They're going to kill this entire street for harboring us. She's still in danger. They won't spare her because she's a child."

"I'm not leaving without you!" Her father roared just above a whisper.

"My bad leg would never make it. Please go before it's too late. I'm begging you... for Hermione. Travel on foot. All the roads and trains are monitored, especially now. There's no time."

They both made gasping cries before her father came into Hermione's room and grabbed her. Noise filtered through from the outside: screams, explosions. Hermione shivered in terror, not understanding what was happening.

"Be brave, my sweet." Her mother kissed her forehead and choked back a cry. "Be kind. Be wise. And be strong. Now go!" Her parents gave each other one hard kiss before her father began to run, exiting the front door, evading notice.

Hermione held on to her father's neck as he sprinted. He clutched her tight, ducking and twisting. Hermione buried her face into the side of his jumper, not wanting to know where they were going or who they ran from. The air outside smelled of something burning, sharp and foul.

They kept going at a grueling pace until the moon hung high in the sky. Her father was shaking and panting, stumbling around houses and buildings, but did not stop until they reached the countryside. From there, his steps slowed, feet tripping on branches, breathing labored.

"I can smell you," a voice carried over the shrubbery. "Pathetic muggle. I can't believe you thought you could get away."

In response, her father reached down, dug into the wet earth, and covered her in mud, a little at a time, until it dripped from her as they wove through the trees. After a minute, he stopped and placed her behind some bushes that prickled against her skin. His lips brushed her forehead. "Stay here, Hermione, and don't come out." He lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. "No matter what you see or what you hear, do not come out. Remember that I always love you."

Hermione nodded in fear, her little curls bouncing, and clutched Hopper close to her chest. She'd never heard her father sound so serious or so scared. Just yesterday, she had blown out the candles on her seventh birthday cake, her father and mother clapping alongside her. She'd promised him before bed she would be big and brave— but she didn't feel very big and brave.

He shoved her further behind the bushes, hair tangling in the brush. She whimpered but didn't have time to protest before her father leapt away from her.

He didn't get far. As soon as he had taken a few steps, a beast entered the little clearing. At least she thought he was a beast. His face was furrier than normal, and his teeth looked sharp. She could smell his musky, rotten scent from where she sat.

"Fenrir," her father said.

The beast grinned.

"Granger." He gave a little nod. "It's a shame I can't eat you, but Malfoy wants you all to himself. You were foolish enough to kill his wife in the last attack."

Her father lunged away, but Fenrir was faster and stronger, subduing him quickly and forcing him to his knees.

It didn't take long for the other monsters to arrive, all dressed in black cloaks with frightening skull masks. Hermione almost gave herself away with a whimper of terror. Five of them melded into the darkness, all adults except one. The littlest monster took off his miniature mask, and she realized he wasn't a monster at all, but a boy who looked her age. He had bright blond hair with pale skin, and eyes red from crying, though he tried to hide it, swiping at his face to get rid of a tear.

The boy looked normal enough, though she understood instinctively he wasn't a boy like her friends from school.

"Is this the insect, Father?" The boy snarled. "The one that killed Mother?"

"Yes, Draco." Long blond wisps of hair hung down from behind the mask, and Hermione understood he was the boy's father. "Robert Granger. The infamous rebel genius."

"Draco shouldn't be here," another monster said. He had a dark black mask, smooth as glass. "He's too young. I doubt you're going to make his death pleasant."

"The boy has a right to see his mother's killer executed. A right to justice. Theo should be here too. After all, the blast killed both your parents as well, Nott."

"I didn't mean to kill the women," her father yelled. "I meant to kill you!"

The beast that held her father yanked his head back. The blond monster walked forward, placing a stick under his chin.

"Unfortunately for you, you didn't. Before I end your pointless existence, I want you to know everyone is dead. The muggles are at our mercy, the Order is fractured, and the rebellion is over. They're all lying in their own blood now, including your precious wife."

Her father gave a guttural noise and tried to surge forward, but the beast gripped his hair more firmly.

"She fought hard. I'll grant her that. I wished to bring her here and slice her throat in front of you... or maybe I'd have kept her. That might have hurt you worse, I imagine, and there'd be a certain level of symmetry to the idea. She was beautiful for a muggle, I admit. I think I would have enjoyed her. Alas, she managed to kill herself before I could decide. So noble... so wasteful."

Her father choked on a sob, and Hermione bit her hand to keep from crying out, shaking behind the bushes. Her mother couldn't be dead, could she?

"Kill me," her father said. "I don't care."

The monster pressed the stick hard into her father's skin.

"I don't suppose you would." The blond monster glanced around. "Though you would care if I killed your daughter. I saw the pictures. A cute little bug, so easily squashed."

Her father tensed.

"She's not here."

"That's exactly what a father would say if she was close. You hid her well. Fenrir can't scent her, but there are other ways to flush out animals."

Her father spit on the ground near the monster's feet, and the little boy grimaced in disgust. In a fury, the man placed the stick next to her father's temple. "Crucio!"

A light erupted from the stick, and her father began screaming. The noise scraped down Hermione's skin. The beast let him go, and her father writhed on the ground, twisting into various grotesqueries of pain. It went on and on, until Hermione couldn't stand it. She had promised to stay hidden, but she needed to help her daddy.

"Stop, stop... don't hurt him!"

Hermione burst from behind the bushes and flung herself on top of her unconscious father. He twitched under her, and she placed her head against his jumper to muffle her sobs.

"The little rat has come out of hiding," the blond monster said. He pointed the stick in her direction, and Hermione flinched, digging her fingers into her father's soft jumper. Hopper slipped from her hands. "He even coated you with mud to hide your scent. So clever, and so fitting."

"Lucius," young Nott warned. "She's Draco's age. I refuse to participate in killing children, no matter how much you hate the father."

"Baby muggles grow up to be big muggles. This one has already shown bad breeding. I would be doing the muggles a favor to weed out the rotten ones, but you're right..." He dropped his stick to his side. "Killing the young is below a wizard. Fenrir, take the child and do with her as you please. Just don't make too much of a mess."



The beast gave a thrilled snarl and stepped toward Hermione. Something familiar and warm simmered inside her chest. It shot down her limbs and into her belly. It sparked, filling her whole body. She'd felt it in the past, but now it was intensified by her fear. When the beast reached down to pluck her off her unconscious father, Hermione let it loose.

"Don't touch me!" A wave of bright energy burst from her, flinging the beast backward and into a tree, making a sickening snap.

The clearing went silent.

"A mudblood!" Lucius tugged off his mask, revealing sharp handsome features that resembled his son. He looked like the beautiful angels in her grandmother's church, face in an expression of delighted surprise. "Granger was hiding her from us. The order too. It all makes sense now."

"A powerful mudblood," another monster said—this one much larger than the others—and they glanced back to Fenrir, still crumpled under the tree. None of them seemed concerned for the beast.

"The most powerful I've seen from someone her age." Lucius agreed. "She'd produce impressive offspring. Rabastan, go check Greyback."

One of the wizards in a skull mask walked over, bent down next to the beast, and then stood back up.

"I can't fucking believe it," he said. "The girl killed him."

Lucius gave a deep laugh, uncaring that the beast had died. He leaned down and grabbed her father by his hair, jolting him awake. Hermione tried to make the energy spark again, but couldn't—it didn't always obey her. She slid off as Lucius tugged her father to his knees. Instead, she clutched his side. Her father's strong arm wrapped around her, pulling her close, while his eyes fluttered open.

"Hear that, muggle?" Lucius grinned. "You failed. Your wife failed. The whole order failed in hiding her from us. Just like all the mudbloods, she'll be raised in a household of our choosing, and when she's old enough, she'll go to the Trials and do her duty in a pureblood bed, producing the next generation of wizards. And the best part... by that point, she'll hardly even remember you."

Her father lunged, but he was too weak and only folded forward, giving a shuddering cry.

"Can I have her, father?" Draco asked. Hermione glanced up to see the little blond boy looking at her in fascination. Hermione snarled, but it only made him smile.

"She seems a little feral," another monster said. "She'd require a lot of training."

"They all do." Lucius stared at the girl in contemplation. "It takes a few years to house train them. It's better to take them young like this, separate them from their muggle families. There will be less fight in them later."

"I'll take her, Lucius," Nott said, with his mask still in place. "Theo is... well, he's struggling. I believe a companion will help him."

"If you raise her with Theo, they are less likely to want to breed when it comes time," Lucius warned.

"Theo's the second son, so he won't need a breeder, but he's... he's not wanting to eat or go outside. A pet might give him responsibility, something to take care of."

"You'll still need to enter her in the Trials when she comes of age. If Theo bonds with the girl, it might upset him to give her up to another wizard."

"Of course. I'll deal with Theo when the time comes."

"But I want her, father," the blond boy said, pouting. "You promised me a pet, and we haven't found very many mudbloods. It's not fair for Theo to get one before me."

"No," Lucius said, looking her over with a critical eye. "Goyle is right. She's a powerful little thing, and there's not very many your age. I won't risk you bonding to her in a platonic way. You may just get her one day, Draco, but it will not be today. Now, take her, Nott, while I dispose of her worthless sire."

Hermione struggled as the man in the black mask came forward, yanking her off her father. She threw little sparks of energy, but they missed their mark each time.

"Stop it. I'm not going to hurt you," Nott said, but Hermione howled in terror and thrashed, hitting him a few times. He cursed under his breath, but managed to pull her tight to his chest, whispering soothing words as he began to walk out of the clearing.

"Daddy!" she screamed. Lucius placed his stick under her father's chin again. Nott tried to press her face to his chest, but she kept popping up to look over his shoulder.

"Resist them, Hermione! Always remember who you are. Don't give—"

A red light hit her father's neck, and blood splattered everywhere. Draco made a disgusted noise.

An inhuman cry was wrenched from Hermione - and then she went limp. Everything fractured inside her soul at once.

"Bloody hell," Nott said. "Did you have to use such a primitive spell? At least, you could have waited until we left. Now my pet will be traumatized."

"He should have stopped talking," Lucius wiped a splash of blood on his hand against his robes. She was unable to take her eyes off her father's body. "And it was what he deserved, taking my wife from me. He's lucky I didn't draw it out longer. Your pet is young. She'll probably forget all about this. Or you could just obliviate her."

"No, it's too risky when they're young. It might scramble her brain." Nott brushed a hand along her hair, smoothing it down.

"What do we need her brain for?"

Nott's eyes crinkled into fury.

"I hate muggleborns as much as you do, Malfoy, but right now they are the only thing keeping us from dying out, whether we like it or not. What's the point of cruelty?"

Lucius considered what he said, looking at Hermione, who was shivering in shock. Her father's blood still stained his hands.

"As much as it still disgusts me, you're right." He looked as if the admission pained him.

"The girl you're holding might one day carry the Malfoy heir, especially if she's as powerful as I suspect. My son deserves a future breeder in good condition, mentally and physically. I want her pampered and treated as such."

"What you want doesn't matter." There was a hard note to Nott's voice. "She's my ward now. Your concern is misplaced. I plan for her to be Theo's companion, not to abuse her and lock her in a broom closet. She'll be given everything she wants or needs and will be taught her value in our society."

Lucius examined Hermione, as if to judge her worth and searching for flaws.

"Very well."

Nott's hand once again brushed down her hair.

"Come on, kid. Let's get you home."

Hermione clutched the monster, whimpering into his dark robes as they walked out of the clearing.

Right before they disappeared, Hermione gave one last look at her father, lying in a pool of blood. She tore her eyes away, and accidentally met the gaze of the little boy standing next to his angel-monster father. He held her stuffed bunny, Hopper, and returned her stare as they walked away, grey eyes piercing through the darkness.

Cover art by [ivmaruva](#)



## Chapter 2: Nott Manor

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Taylor Swift- Safe and Sound (ft. The Civil Wars)

Edited by the lovely MyPrivateInsanity

This will be an HEA for Dramione. But it won't be for every character.

For those that like the platform, House Pet is also on ff.net under the same penname of NinaBinaBallerina. The update schedule will be the same.

When they walked past the clearing, the monster took a broom from his pocket, expanding it on contact. He attempted to peel Hermione off him, but she refused to budge, shivering with terror.

"You need to let go and get on the broom."

"No." Her whole world had cracked under her feet, and if she let go, she might be swallowed by something more terrifying than the monster.

"Fine," he said. "I think I could still fly like this. Hold on."

Without warning, he launched into the sky. Hermione screamed against his cloak until her throat hurt. When she quieted, she heard Nott making a deep shushing noise, trying to calm her, and it made his chest rumble. She focused on the sound instead of the fact they dangled over the Earth.

They flew for a long way. Her brain forgot most of the trip, besides the chilly air lashing against her skin. To protect her from the wind, Nott wrapped her tighter in his cloak, which smelled nice, like fire and cinnamon. It should have comforted her, but her shock wouldn't let her settle. Hermione closed her eyes, unable to look around, fearful of both the monster and the flight.

"I won't drop you," he said, but Hermione didn't trust him.

"Only birds should fly."

His chest gave a sudden spasm, and she thought he might have laughed. Hermione just held tighter, struggling to get lost in the black cloak—the infinite dark.

When they landed in a city, he walked inside a building with her still clinging to him. She must be getting heavy, but he didn't complain or attempt to rip her off again.

The men and women sitting at desks startled backward at his entrance, looking at his mask as if it would jump off his face and eat them. One woman in a red dress gave a high-pitched scream, crouching down with her hands raised.

"We didn't do anything," a man with heavy eyebrows pleaded. "Please, have mercy. Don't kill us. I swear on my life we—"

"I'm just here for the floo. They did build one here, correct?"

"Y—yes." The man's voice shook. The lady in the red dress crawled under her desk as the monster turned toward the speaker. "Right this way."

The man led them toward a fireplace, looking as if he might be ill at any minute. The monster grabbed a handful of powder from a jar on the mantel and threw it into the ashes. "Ministry of Magic," he said. He walked into the fireplace and then stepped out somewhere new. It happened too fast for Hermione to react.

The place they entered was crawling with people in odd clothing. Many of them stopped walking and stared at her as they passed. Hermione assumed they stared at her dirty appearance. Mud still covered her, drying hard to her skin, and leaves were tangled in her hair.

The monster walked through hallways, ignoring everyone, until he entered a spacious office. An old man sat at a desk with a plaque in front of him that read Chief Warlock right next to another that said Walter Filibus. He scratched at a parchment with a feather and glanced up through reading glasses.

"Titus," he greeted. "Is this the muggleborn I've been hearing about?"

"Yes."

"This tiny thing killed Fenrir?"

"She did."

The old man made a funny noise, between a cough and a laugh.

"She did the wizarding world a favor." He studied her, as if she was an animal in a zoo. "That was an impressive feat for her age, even compared to the pureblood children. I'm sure Lucius and the others are already scheming to get their sons' tokens in as soon as possible."

The old man threw a kind smile toward her, but Hermione kept her frown.

"Well, sit down, son, so we can finish."

"She... won't let go. Her retrieval has left her in a state of shock."

Walter paused to search in his desk and pulled out a piece of blue candy she'd never seen, reminding her of a feather

"Here, little one. You don't need to be frightened. No one will hurt you."

*That* she didn't believe at all.

The candy looked delicious and strange, but Hermione just buried her face into the cloak, refusing it. She feared the monster, but she'd rather be close to him than the other strangers.

"Alright, I can see she needs to get home," Walter said. "If you sign, I'll finish the legal papers for her. Are you sure you want the responsibility? I understand your live-in nanny will take care of her while you attend Hogwarts, but you'll need to be her guardian as she ages. Many of the muggleborns are... unruly."

Titus sighed, as if unsure.

"The current muggleborns of age for the Trials are too old to assimilate to their new lives. I think this one will settle fine." He gave a soft pat to her shoulders. "And Theo could use a pet, especially since I'm gone so much."

The old man nodded .

"Your nanny will need to take her for a check-up at St. Mungo's within the month to make sure she's healthy. Muggles carry all sorts of diseases."

"I'll tell her."

Walter handed him some parchments; Titus leaned over as much as he could, took a feather, and began to scratch on it, signing his name.

"I need permission to apparate to the manor."

"You don't have a license yet?"

"Not until next year. Since the Order sent the explosive through the floo at Malfoy Manor, ours has been deactivated. I'm hesitant about reactivating it until I know the threat is over, and Hermione didn't handle broom travel well."

"Do you know how to do it without splinching, especially with another person?"

"Of course. My father taught me long ago. I've practiced several times on our property."

"I'll allow it this once." Walter leaned back in his chair with his hands folded across his stomach, examining Titus. "Your parents would be proud at how well you've managed after their deaths. I'm told your marks in school are excellent. Top of your class, Quidditch Captain, and slated to be Head Boy next year. And you've already secured an internship in the auror department after you graduate. I'm expecting great things from you."

Titus sucked in a breath. He nodded slightly at the man and then walked out, his chest stiffer than it had been before.

He didn't seem to like talking about his parents.

---

They popped from existence—an unpleasant sensation—and arrived in front of a giant, imposing house made of dark grey stone. Around the building, mythical marble creatures stood guard inside a labyrinth of gardens. Since they left the ministry, Nott kept petting her hair, smoothing it down in long strokes meant to comfort, but Hermione didn't think she'd ever be happy again.

They walked into the house just as it began to drizzle, droplets of water striking their skin. It reminded her of tears. The sky cried, but Hermione couldn't. Something broke deep inside her chest.

The inside of the manor had dark, heavy curtains, forest green wallpaper, and diamond patterned marble floors. Accents of gold gleamed in the dim light, and a giant chandelier hovered over them with teardrop crystals and floating candles. Everything looked both outdated and delicate, like a museum. Hermione wondered if the house was haunted when a suit of armor creaked, twisting its metal head toward her. The portraits whispered to each other; one even gave a small wave which she didn't return. Even the tapestries moved—giant trolls swinging their clubs across the weft threads as she walked by. If she had ever imagined a home for a monster, it would be this one.

An old lady met them in the foyer, her white hair pulled back in a low bun and an apron tied around her waist. When she saw Nott, she placed a hand on her chest.

"Oh my, Titus, who are you holding?"

"A little muggleborn named Hermione."

The old lady gasped and walked forward.

"Oh, you poor dear... you poor, poor dear." Hermione transferred into the old woman's arms, much stronger than they first appeared. She set her on her wobbly feet, keeping her pressed close to her apron. "You should be ashamed of yourself. I didn't help raise you to participate in this sick system they've set up. Your mother would be ashamed as well. I thought you swore you'd never get a muggleborn, finding it distasteful."

Titus pulled off his black mask to reveal a handsome teenager with dark hair that curled at the ends and blue eyes that glowed in the dimmed light. Titus looked at her and grimaced, color flooding his cheeks.

"I'm not in the mood, Tabitha. It's been a very long, tiring day. If I hadn't taken her, she'd have gone to Malfoy, and he hates her kind more than I do. And Merlin forbid if *Rabastan* had taken her. I just... I thought Theo needed a companion. He's been so withdrawn since... And besides, it hardly matters what *I* think. We need them, or we'll die out. My objection to it doesn't stop the necessity. At least here, she'll be safe."

"Where did you find her?" The woman's arms were thick and warm, enveloping her in comfort, smelling like baked bread and powdered sugar.

Titus hesitated.

"Her father was part of the Order and planned the Beltane Massacres. We caught them both on the hunt."

Tabitha let out another little gasp, holding her tighter. Hermione remembered now her father was responsible for the death of Nott's parents. Despite her grief, Hermione felt some odd bit of pity. The circular pain confused her.

"She's dirty from head to toe. Did you find her in a field?"

"Her father covered her in mud to hide her from Fenrir, but... well, Lucius took his revenge, and she saw all of it."

At that, Hermione buried her face into Tabitha's arm. She wanted to cry, but couldn't. Her body refused to grieve.

"You're safe now," Tabitha whispered.

By the time she looked back up, Titus had disappeared. Tabitha brought her upstairs and began washing Hermione in a clawfoot tub, scrubbing her until her skin turned pink. When her hair was brushed, a little grey creature popped into the bathroom. Hermione almost screamed, but Tabitha gave her another soothing hug, and she calmed down.

"It's only a house elf. She won't do you any harm. Now, here, dress in these." She held up some boy's clothes. "They are Theo's, but you look like you wear similar sizes. They will be sufficient until we can buy you a new wardrobe."

Now clean and with warm clothes, her body reached the peak of exhaustion, and when Tabitha brought her into another hug, she fell asleep.

---

She didn't remember the next few days. A dark ghost haunted her mind, and it resisted the sunshine, tugging her under again and again. She didn't eat or sleep, simply rested in bed, staring at the ceiling. She flinched when anyone entered the room, though she started to like the little elf, Bitty. After the initial fright, Hermione found it cute with its big, floppy ears.

One day, Titus and Tabitha entered her room. Hermione kept her eyes on the opposite wall.

"Did she eat today?" Titus asked.

"Barely."

"Fucking Lucius—"

"Language, Titus!"

Titus gave a loud, long sigh.

"I just don't know what to do. Both of them are like this now, and I have to leave soon. The headmaster only gave me a week."



"Of course, you don't know what to do. You've always been smart and responsible, but you're only sixteen. You aren't supposed to know what to do with losing both your parents, leaving you to raise your little brother and now a sad muggleborn. We're all lost. Give it time to find our way."

Titus sighed.

"Any ideas then? Because at this rate, she'll starve to death."

Tabitha took a moment to work through the situation. Hermione felt eyes on her back.

"Have you thought about putting them together?"

"In the same room?"

"It might give them comfort to have each other."

Titus thought about it.

"Might as well try it. Bitty, go get a temporary bed set up in Theo's room."

---

The next morning a boy poked her side, and she startled awake. She had a moment of panic looking at her unfamiliar surroundings before the memories caught up to her. The pain stabbed her, and she gasped, but she shed no more tears. The terrible emotion went through her, leaving her insides as stone.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Me?" The boy looked incredulous at her question. He seemed about her age, with lighter hair than Titus. His face was skinny and long, and he wore glasses that kept sliding down his nose. "You're the one in *my* room. I just woke up and found you here."

His room? She examined her surroundings. The room was spacious, with flags on the walls, reminding her of the football teams her daddy watched. A picture of a man floating on a broom near some odd hoops took up the wall opposite the window. She would have been startled when it moved, but most of the paintings around the home did as well. The room smelled like a boy— a bit like grass mixed with wet dog, as if the sheets needed washing. She wrinkled her nose in slight disgust.

"Why am I here?"

The boy shrugged, and then he looked contemplative.

"What happened before you came here?"

Hermione blanched and snuggled under the blankets, pulling them over her head.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Wait... are you a mudblood?"

Hermione pulled down the covers a little, just enough her head poked out, giving a frown. That's what they called her, but it never sounded nice, and she didn't like it.

"I think so, but my name is Hermione... and you're Theo. Your brother talked about you."

Theo frowned.

"That's odd. Titus said he'd never get a mudblood."

"My name is *Hermione*," she said with a little more bite. "Mudblood sounds icky."

His eyes widened, but he seemed to understand. He looked a little upset that she was here.

"Did they take you from your family?"

Hermione glanced out the window, hating the sunshine. She wished she could politely ask the birds to stop chirping.

"My parents are dead."

Theo froze, and then his expression softened.

"I'm sorry." He sounded sincere. "My parents are dead too. People will try to tell you everything will be okay, but it's a lie."

Hermione nodded, accepting what he said. They shared a pain no one else understood, except maybe that Draco boy.

"Hey, let's get something to eat," Theo said, trying to change the subject. "I think we can convince the elves to give us hot cocoa... if Tabitha's not up. She'll try to stop us from having *any* fun."

"Is that the old lady?"

"Yeah, she's our half-blood nanny. Been here all my life. I think she might be older than Salazar himself."

Hot cocoa sounded wonderful, though a part of Hermione hurt so bad she wished to snuggle back into bed forever. Still, her curiosity won out, and Hermione got up and followed him out of the room.

---

They stayed together all day, running around the manor, which was the largest house she'd ever seen. She forgot all about the monsters in the masks, about her dead parents. Theo taught her how to slide down the giant banister, and they made daring turns, shrieking with laughter, until Tabitha caught them and came after Theo with a wooden spoon.

Laughing some more, they dashed outside before she could catch them and spent the rest of the day in his treehouse. It was much nicer than any she'd ever seen before, with real child-sized furniture, outfitted to look like the manor—forest green wallpaper, a faux fireplace, and moving portraits on the walls. To get inside, there was a rope attached to a deep red bucket that pulled her up with magic. It shocked Hermione, but only for a moment, because in this place, magic happened everywhere.

She didn't see Titus again, except briefly when he walked out of the house. He looked at her with a grimace before leaving.

"I don't think he likes me very much," she said.

"He's never liked muggles," Theo admitted. "Especially after... Anyway, he's always gone. He'll be going back to school tomorrow, so Tabitha will take care of us."

"What happens when he finishes school?"

She worried about living with one of the monsters.

"He'll move back home, but he already has a job at the ministry as an auror after he graduates. Tabitha thinks he'll move up fast, since he's a prodigy with dueling. Whatever that means."

"Oh," Hermione said. It made her feel better she wouldn't see the monster that much.

That night, they ate dinner at the formal table. The serving dishes crawled around on command, which Hermione thought was brilliant, even though sometimes the spoons gave her more than she asked for. Back at home, they didn't have much food. Her mother had once said she had to eat everything, because people were starving, so the amount of food on the table shocked Hermione, but it all tasted delicious. Theo and Hermione whispered and giggled, hiding their green beans until Tabitha glared, and they straightened.

When she looked up, Titus was examining her in a piercing way, and then he gave a small grin, as if she passed a test, but she was too scared to return the smile.

When bedtime came, Tabitha and the elves helped them get dressed in pajamas and brush their teeth. She still wore Theo's clothes, but Tabitha insisted she'd get her own soon. When the elves tucked her into the small bed, and Theo in his giant bed, she felt fine at first. But when the lights went out, her memories came back and soon everything she had tried to push down all day overwhelmed her. It hit her with a cold clarity that both her parents were dead, and her whole life was forever changed. She gasped but still couldn't bring herself to cry.

"Hermione," Theo asked in concern. "Are you alright?"

"No," she answered. "I'm afraid. Do you mind if I... well, if I slept with you?"

She used to sleep in her parents' bed when she woke up afraid, but now she had nowhere to go, and she'd lost Hopper.

"Of course, you can. My bed is too big anyway."

Hermione crawled up and settled down under his covers. Theo reached out his hand, and she grabbed it, accepting the comfort. His hand was warm and soft, and it soothed her to touch another person, even if his sheets smelled like a disgusting boy.

"Thank you," she said. Her chest still hurt, but she did feel safer.

Theo was silent while her pain ebbed away.

"I've always wanted a sister," he whispered. "Titus said you're my pet, but that's just silly. A dog is a pet, and I want you to be family. Do you want a brother?"

"Yes," she answered. "Very much so."

She didn't need to see Theo to know he smiled.

"Perfect. I can't wait until tomorrow. I need to show you the south pond. Supposedly, there's a water beast at the bottom, but I've never seen it."

That did sound fun. In anticipation of the morning, she laid her head down and went to sleep, still holding Theo's hand.

---

She woke up to voices. One belonged to Titus, the other to Tabitha. They stood in the doorway, looking at them sleeping, still holding hands. Hermione pretended to be asleep.

"She's good for him," Tabitha said. "I was wrong to lecture you. You made the right choice. Saved her from a harder fate. And Theo played today for the first time in months."

"I just hope he doesn't get too attached. When she's older, she'll have to leave. I have a feeling I'm making a mistake."

"Foolish boy. One day you'll realize pain is the price of love, but it's worth paying. Theo needs something to love, or he'll never heal. You can't protect him from heartbreak." She turned to Titus. "You need healing as well—something to love—though I know you believe you're just fine. Maybe you'll grow to care for the girl too."

Titus scoffed and placed his hand on the doorframe, the heavy Nott family ring clicking against the wood. After a moment, he shook his head and left.

Young Hermione by [Cabrlita10](#)

 Young Hermione

## Chapter 3: Loopholes

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: The Cinematic Orchestra- “To Build a Home”

The MVP for this chapter is my beta, MyPrivateInsanity!

Hermione was the one who found it—a shimmering hole in the wards.

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know.” Theo crawled over the thickets, getting several scratches in the process. Hermione pushed some overgrown plants out of the way. The wards had a faint buzzing sound, and as they got closer, it grew louder. Every December, Theo and Titus put a drop of blood at each of the four corners of the property to fortify the old spells, which had held strong for six hundred years. But all magic had loopholes, or so Tabitha told her once.

“I knew there must be some small rip, but I never thought I’d find it.” Theo reached forward and ran his hand through the shimmer. “Wicked,” he said. “We could pass right on through if we wanted.”

The Nott grounds were massive. Hermione always unearthed some new corner to explore—old statues standing near small ponds, berries growing near a creek, gnarled trees with thick lower branches perfect for climbing. They spent most of their time outdoors, pretending to sword fight like muggles or battling imaginary dragons, so it stood to reason they’d discover the ward hole eventually.

“Let’s see where it goes,” Hermione said. “Maybe it will take us to the Fae lands.”

Theo shook his head.

“We’d get in so much trouble if we left the grounds without permission. We could get lost or hurt... or the Order could come and snatch us away.”

“Maybe tomorrow we could,” she said. “We’d just hop out and hop in.”

Theo seemed conflicted.

“Maybe,” he said. “But Titus comes back from Hogwarts today for the summer. He wouldn’t like it if I put you in danger. Sorry, Hermione, I don’t think we can.”

Disappointment arrived first. She hated leaving things unexplored. The shimmering hole called to her curiosity. In fact, she thought she saw another ward hole three trees over, but

since Theo was ungrateful about her first find, she didn't wish to show him her second.

The fear arrived as they walked back to the manor. Titus was returning — the monster in the dark robe and black mask. He'd been home for Christmas and Easter, and both times they avoided each other. Hermione shied away from his piercing gaze, either staying in the library or outside to escape him, and Titus never searched her out.

A whole summer with him being home sounded horrible, and she felt sick to her stomach.

Hermione hid out in her room the rest of the day, complaining of feeling ill. She didn't lie. Her heart flipped and squeezed with her growing anxiety.

She heard voices in the afternoon: Titus' deep laugh, Theo's high-pitched complaint, Tabitha's chiding. A part of her wished to be out with them, but she couldn't make herself move from the bed. The elves brought dinner to her room, but she couldn't eat it, only managing to drink the pumpkin juice.

The idea occurred to her in the middle of the night. The thoughts of Titus made the memories of her parents hurtle back to her in a complicated, confusing rush. She understood enough to know her father wasn't sleeping and would never come back. But her mother – maybe Lucius lied. Her mum must miss her terribly.

With that thought, Hermione got out of bed and grabbed a bag, stuffing it with some clothes. She put on her dragon hide hiking boots. After some consideration, she took two dinner rolls and wrapped them in a shirt, stuffing them down into the bag.

Once done, she walked out of the room, throwing the bag over her shoulder. She avoided the elves, knowing their routines. When she passed by Theo's room, she briefly reconsidered her plan, blinking back tears while staring at his closed door. Hermione would miss him with her whole heart, Tabitha too, but she needed to find her mum.

No one stopped her as she walked out of the house and trundled through the brambles and thorns. At night, the countryside turned sinister. The bushes transformed into monsters, the trees into giant demons. Noises made her peer into the dark, but she kept on walking, heart hammering, until she found the shimmering hole. The thicket of shrubbery almost caught her with its thorns, but she deftly climbed over it.

Hermione took a deep breath and passed through the shimmer. She expected to feel something, but when she looked back there was nothing to indicate a barrier of any sort.

Seeing nothing but countryside in every direction, she hesitated, wondering which way to go. *Forward*, she thought. Hermione marched along until she became tired and crouched down next to a flowing creek, taking a deep drink of water. She took out the rolls and chewed on them.

After she finished, Hermione climbed a nearby tree to the furthest branch she could reach. What she found made her stomach sink – absolutely nothing. She was all alone. It almost made her despair, but she kept going with her plan, climbing back down.

Further into the hike, Hermione found some berries she recognized tangled under a giant tree, illuminated by the moonlight. She popped several in her mouth, sucking the liquid out, enjoying the flavor bursting on her tongue. But after eating, she could no longer ignore her fear. She sat down, curling her feet under her, knowing she was too little for this trip. She'd never find home, having no idea where to even go. Maybe she'd be lost forever.

Before she could start crying, she heard a snap of branches. Hermione was startled and turned to find Titus walking slowly toward her. She froze, the fear racing through her again, but when he got closer, he crouched down.

"I know you're scared of me, but I'm not going to hurt you."

"Am I in trouble?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing.

"I'm not your parent, Hermione. I must look like an adult to you, but I'm still a kid myself... just older." He hesitated and reached into the bag by his side, extracting a purple box and holding it out to her. "I got this for you on the train ride. I thought you might like it. You haven't tried wizarding sweets yet."

Hermione eyed the box with trepidation, but eventually she reached out and accepted it. Walter Filbus had offered her a blue feather lollipop the first terrible night, but she'd refused it. Since then, she'd wondered what it would have tasted like.

"What is it?" She examined the box, flipping it over.

"A chocolate frog," he said. "Go ahead, open it."

She did as he asked and almost squealed when it hopped right out of the package. She caught the frog, shoving it to her mouth, and then laughed, surprising even herself. Titus watched her with a soft smile. It relaxed his face and turned him from a monster into... something else. Not a parent. Not a brother. Not a friend. He was a new category of person in her life she had trouble labeling.

Hermione smiled at him.

"Thank you," she said. "How did you know I was out here?"

"I saw you walk out of the manor, so I followed, curious to see where you were going. It looked like you were on an important mission with your bag, marching along. Imagine my surprise when you slipped right through the wards without detection. Not only did you manage the impossible, but you navigated all the way here, feeding yourself, getting water. You reminded me of a fairy sprite, wandering in the dark, tenacious and clever."

Pride filled Hermione. Something about Titus made a person want to gain his approval, his attention, his acceptance. He still scared her a little, but she found herself able to relax. Noticing her loose posture, Titus came over and sat next to her. He brought out his own chocolate frog to eat.

“You followed me the whole way?” She asked, sucking the lingering sweetness off her fingers.

“The whole way,” he confirmed.

“Why didn’t you try to stop me?”

He paused, taking a bite of chocolate, and glanced into the treetops up toward the multitude of stars.

“I think you needed to wander a little. We all do sometimes.” He looked down at her. “But we need to go home eventually.”

They sat in silence, listening to the comforting sound of wind rustling leaves. Something choked her a little, and she needed to get it out.

“I wanted to find my mum,” she admitted. “My old home.”

“I thought that might be the case.” He sighed and closed his eyes. “Do you want to know an adult lesson? I think I learned it earlier than I should have.”

Hermione bit her lip but nodded.

“Sometimes, after a long time away, we find our home has changed. It’s turned into something else, and it will never go back to what it was before. Even if it looks the same, the journey changes us, and the home we once belonged to makes us feel like trespassers.” He paused, as if trying to determine what he wished to say next. “When my parents died, my whole world shifted, and my home felt foreign. And then you came. It was... an adjustment. I wasn’t sure of it before, but we all fit together now. There’s no going back, Hermione. Your home is now with me, Theo, and Tabitha. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

She understood enough. She may find home, but it wouldn’t be the same home she ran from. Not with her mummy and daddy gone. Because her mum was dead too. She knew it in her bones. Hermione trembled, though it didn’t gut her with grief like it used to. Titus reached out and patted her back.

“Come on, let’s go back. I have a whole bag of sweets for you to try.”

Hermione perked up a little.

“Really?”

When Titus smiled, his whole face lit, displaying matching dimples and sparkling eyes. It made her feel oddly safe, though she wasn’t sure if she trusted it yet. They both stood up at the same time, brushing off dirt and leaves.

“You need to try the jellybeans. One time I got a vomit flavored one, but most of them are delicious. The surprise is what makes them fun.”

Hermione hesitated but let him lead her back to the manor.



---

Three years later, Hermione stood in Diagon Alley, waiting for Theo to exit the quidditch shop. She'd never been anywhere but the manor, so her eyes stayed wide, as she took in all the sights and smells. The number of people almost overwhelmed her.

"Why haven't you brought me here before?" Hermione twirled on the cobblestone street with her arms out and her face turned to the overcast sky. "It's wonderful!"

Titus ran a hand through his short hair, curling at the ends, dark blue eyes glancing around in a state of alert. He had his wand drawn. Many of the young witches stared at him, though he didn't seem to look back at them, too focused on some invisible threat. He was a rising star in the auror department, unusual for a wizard so young. Even if he had been average looking and unemployed, he was still the heir to the Nott name and fortune. It made him an attractive prospect for a partner. Or, at least, that's what Tabitha told her.

Many of the missions he went on involved high-ranking officials. If he kept it up, he was set to achieve the title of Mediator within ten years. She wasn't sure what he did exactly, except he dealt with the muggle government and stopped rebellions and terrorist attacks. It made her feel proud to stand beside him, belonging to his household.

Another girl giggled when she walked past, glancing at Titus, and Hermione felt the desire to glare at her.

"It's not safe," he finally answered her question. "The Order is still active, and there are some desperate wizards who might also steal a muggleborn. But you deserve to see Diagon Alley, so I'm willing to risk it."

The Order scared her. Both Titus and Theo explained how evil they were. They forced her father to work for them, which resulted in his death. It made sense. Why else would her father attack peaceful wizards? They had no choice but to kill him. Her tutor told her the Order's mission was to steal muggleborns from their pureblood homes. Sometimes she had nightmares about them ripping her away from Nott manor, and sometimes she had nightmares about her father, but those were beginning to get fuzzy in her head. During the day, she tried not to think too much about either.

"Why would another wizard steal me?"

Titus' eyes slid to her and he frowned.

"Didn't your tutor explain it yet?"

“A little,” Hermione said. “Just that wizards need muggleborns because Dumbledore cursed the purebloods before he died. He said I was very important and rare, and I’m providing an invaluable service to the wizarding community. But when I asked what service I’ll provide, he said that was a question to ask you.”

Titus blew out a hard breath.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

She didn’t like that.

“Why can’t I know now?”

His cheeks turned red, but she didn’t understand what there was to be embarrassed about.

“Because you can’t.”

“I’m not a little kid anymore. Wait... does it have to do with babies? Theo said muggleborns have babies, though I’m not sure why that matters.”

“What do you know about having babies?”

“Not much. Theo said a witch and a wizard get naked and hug—”

Hermione’s next words died in her mouth. Now it was Hermione’s turn to feel embarrassed. Somehow, she knew it wasn’t a subject to be talked about in public. Titus didn’t look comfortable either, shifting his feet.

“Theo needs to quit talking about things he doesn’t understand. Do you ever stop asking questions?”

She shook her head, and his lip jumped in a small smirk.

“No, I want to know everything.”

It looked like he might respond to that, but Theo ran out of the quidditch shop, holding new top-of-the-line quidditch leathers. He jumped in excitement.

“I found some in your size, Hermione!”

Hermione wrinkled her nose.

“No thanks.”

She hated quidditch, and she hated flying, but that didn’t stop Theo from trying to make her like it.

Titus gave a loud laugh, showing off his dimples in a wide smile. Hermione’s cheeks felt hot at the sight, and she wondered why it made her stomach feel twisted. It was the same response as embarrassment, but warmer, more exciting, and crossed her body in a rush.

“You have about as much chance of getting Hermione on a broom as you do beating me in a duel.”

Theo stuck out his tongue at his brother, and Titus tried to pull it.

“Where to next, *baby* brother?”

“Hey... I’m not a baby!” Theo yelled. “I’m almost ten years old.”

“A bookstore!” Hermione shouted, trying to stop the sibling fight before it escalated. Titus tended to be merciless in his teasing. “Please, let’s go and buy books next. Please, please, please.”

She jumped up and down with her hands clasped together.

Titus rolled his eyes but gave her an endearing smile.

“I don’t think it’s possible for me to say no to you, especially when you look at me with those puppy eyes. Honestly, it’s unfair. I should punish you more before you’re spoiled beyond repair.”

It was a joke, because he never punished her, letting her do what she wished. She snuck in on Theo’s schooling, until eventually Titus let her stay.

“The other wizards won’t like how educated she is,” Tabitha had warned, not knowing she stood behind the door.

Titus had only shrugged.

“It helps Theo pay attention to his lessons with her there. Besides, I don’t think I could keep her from it even if I tried. She’s too smart for her own good. Might as well oversee the education. What could it hurt? It only raises the standards for her future. The wizard that gets her will have to be worthy of her, intelligent and clever.”

Tabitha only eyed him with a half-hidden smile.

“I think Theo won’t be the only one reluctant to give her up when the time comes.”

He frowned at that.

“It’s my duty to find her a good match. I’m not accepting tokens from incompetent wizards. Hermione will have the best.”

“Duty... of course.” Tabitha let her eyebrow raise.

“Fine,” he conceded. “I care for the girl. Not sure how that happened, but she’s not like the other muggles. Maybe I got her out before they could corrupt her.”

After hearing that, Hermione was glad Titus took her when he did. Imagine if she grew up as a muggle! Just the thought made her want to shiver in disgust. The next chance she got she

hugged Titus. Physical affection didn't happen often between them, but she'd been so overwhelmed with love for Theo, Tabitha, Titus, and even the little elves, she couldn't stop herself. Her arms cinched around his stomach. He stiffened, but then ruffled her hair.

"What's this for?"

"I'm just happy I'm here."

"Well—" It sounded like something caught in his throat. "I'm happy you're here too. Now go find Theo. I just know he's trying to sneak out of his spelling lessons."

---

On their way to the bookstore, they passed Ollivander's wand shop and got distracted. Theo pressed his nose to the glass, and Hermione copied him.

"I can't wait to get one next year," Theo said.

Hermione frowned. An ugly emotion tangled inside her. It surprised her with the intensity.

"Can I have one too?" she asked Titus, already knowing he'd say no.

Muggleborns used a ministry-approved wand that blunted spells. Hermione didn't want to be limited to cleaning spells or a simple Lumos. Last year, during history lessons, the tutor showed her and Theo a memory of Voldemort and Dumbledore's duel. The bright colors snapping around, the power electrifying even through the memory—it made something inside her sizzle. The magic in her chest responded to the image, curling out to her fingers, just begging to be released.

She was never foolish enough to play with magic with anyone watching. Even Titus might be wary that she could control it a little. It wasn't normal, she knew this, even among pureblood children. In her free time, she moved objects a fraction with willpower and could turn on and off lights. Imagine what she could do with a wand! It felt instinctively wrong to deny her something essential to being a witch just because she was born to muggle parents, though, she realized, the ministry must have *some* reason to deny muggleborns wands.

"Sorry, Sprite, you know you can't. Not from Ollivander's."

He tugged on her braid when she frowned, unable to hide her disappointment.

"Hey, let's forget about wands and go get those books you wanted. I'll buy you three if you stop looking at me like that... okay, five."

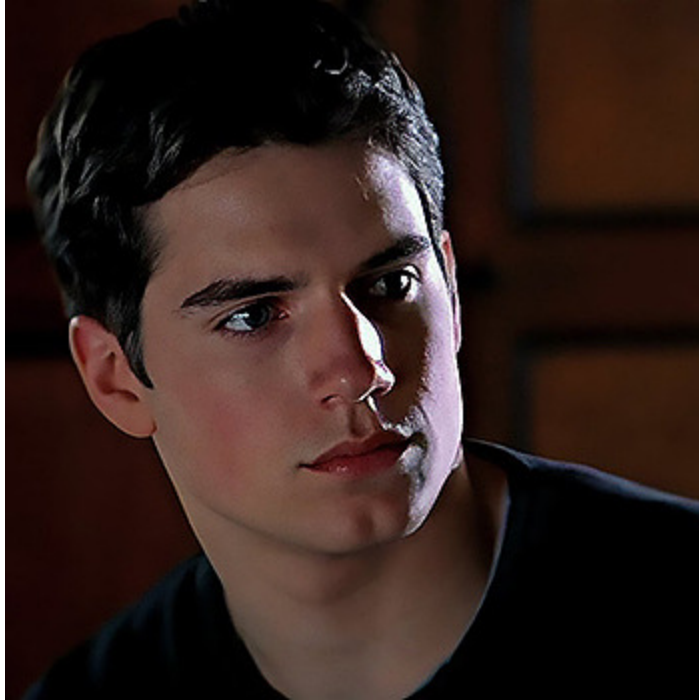
"And ice cream," Hermione said.

"You're a ruthless negotiator, knowing I'll do anything to cheer you up. Fine, books then ice cream, but you have to promise not to ask me about wands again."

She nodded, but she didn't give a verbal promise, a loophole she hoped he overlooked.

Because she planned to have a real wand one day, with or without his approval.

Young Titus Nott:



## Chapter 4: Birthday Surprises

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Lana Del Rey- “Once Upon a Dream” (Maleficent Soundtrack)

A big thank you to Erica for being my Beta and looking over this chapter!

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

Two weeks later, Theo had his tenth birthday party. Before the event, Hermione worked on his gift. As per tradition, the gift couldn't be something they bought, but something they made. Titus helped her with the final touches, and then she wrapped it up, anxious for him to open it.

After that, Hermione assisted the elves and Tabitha in getting the manor ready for his friends coming over, hanging streamers and blowing up balloons. The party decorations looked odd set against the ancient decor. In a moment of inspiration, she strapped a polka dot party hat on the suit of armor, much to its consternation. She giggled when it gave an irritated shake of its metal head.

“What friends does Theo have?” Hermione asked, hopping off the step stool. Tabitha was wrapping the bottom of the banister in ribbons.

“Just you, I think, which is why Titus invited the other pureblood sons. He's worried he's not making enough connections.”

“But Theo told me they're mean. I don't want those bullies over.”

“Child, the boy needs more friends than a muggleborn.”

Hermione placed her hands on her hips with a frown.

“Why would he? We're perfectly happy together.”

Tabitha straightened, handing the rest of the ribbon to Bitty. She wiped a bead of sweat off her forehead with the edge of her sleeve.

“You two won't be together forever. One day, you'll both have your own lives.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes.

“No, I won't. I want to be with Theo *forever*.”

“That’s the problem. One day you’ll be a breeder for another pureblood– maybe even one of the boys arriving today– and he might not be understanding of how close you two are. It just won’t be appropriate.”

She meant the way they sometimes still slept in the same bed when she had her terrible nightmares. Hermione didn’t understand what Titus and Tabitha found so wrong with it. He was her brother, and his presence soothed her. They each had their separate side. Theo’s bed was massive, much too big for a single person.

“What’s a breeder?”

Tabitha cursed under her breath.

“An honorable position you’ll take on when you’re of age. After that, you’ll no longer be considered a Nott, but whoever you’re connected with.”

“Like marriage?”

Tabitha looked concerned.

“Now where did you hear that word?”

She shrugged, but Tabitha knew it probably came from Theo.

“No,” her nanny said. “The old wizarding families don’t get married anymore. Not since Dumbledore’s curse. What would be the point? It would just split their wealth. But it will be close enough, I suppose, though it’s not guaranteed to be forever. They can send you to another household if they wish.”

Hermione thought hard, wrinkling her nose, not understanding everything she talked about. She didn’t want to live in some stupid pureblood boy’s house, not if it meant leaving Theo.

“Then I’ll be Theo’s breeder.”

Tabitha gave a snort of a laugh and shook her head.

“You’ll change your mind about that when you’re older.”

Hermione didn’t understand why she would. She wondered if it was about sex—a naughty word Theo told her about. When a witch and wizard hugged naked. If so, Tabitha might have a point. She’d seen Theo naked before, but she didn’t like seeing him that way, and she wouldn’t want to hug him without clothes. She remembered the way her cheeks heated when thinking about Titus, the excited tumble of her stomach when he laughed.

“Well, then maybe I’ll be a breeder for Titus.”

Tabitha sighed. She reached out and cradled Hermione’s cheek.

“He’s handsome, isn’t he? I’ve seen the way you look at him sometimes. An innocent puppy crush, I think. Don’t worry, Titus is oblivious, and I’m not planning on telling him.”

Hermione looked down, too embarrassed to meet her eyes.

Tabitha gave an affectionate pat to her cheek.

“Don’t worry, my girl. It will be a long time before those decisions are made. By then, you’ll have your eye on someone your own age.”

---

The party started in the afternoon. The fairy lights brightened in the bushes with the full heat of the summer warming the air. Flowers bloomed along the labyrinth gardens, enticing people to enter. Tall tables were stationed around the main hedge maze, and uniformed servants weaved through the guests with hovering trays of refreshments and Hors d’oeuvres.

Hermione wore her favorite dress—a dark blue tulle embroidered with unicorns in delicate golden thread that gave a slight glow and pranced along her hemline. Tabitha wove real flowers into her curly hair and allowed her to wear a sprinkle of shimmer on her eyes and cheeks. It made her feel like a Fae princess while running through the smaller hedge maze, searching for rogue gnomes.

The purebloods arrived in small waves, including a few with muggleborns like her. Hermione could barely contain her excitement, bouncing on her toes, because she’d never seen another muggleborn before. The Goyles had a little girl with dark straight hair a year older than her named Katie. The Crabbes had a boy named Justin, who they nicknamed Finch. She tried to be nice to him when he arrived, but he stuck his nose in the air and stayed by his family.

Hermione ignored him in return, attempting not to be hurt and showed Katie her room, letting her play with her art supplies. Once they got bored of that, she brought her to the treehouse.

“Wow,” Katie said, admiring the view. “My family lives by the sea, so there are no trees big enough for this. But we get to play in the ocean sometimes— with temperature regulation charms of course— though not if it’s too rough, because Greg is scared of the waves. Oh wait... don’t tell anyone that. The other boys tease him sometimes, and it makes me angry.”

Hermione promised to keep silent.

Before they could play longer, a woman called Katie’s name. Her new friend stood up and looked out the treehouse window, groaning in agitation.

“That’s my mistress. I think she wants me to meet a potential Trial selection.”

“Trial selection?”



The word confused her, but Katie continued, as if she should know.

“Yeah, Marcus Flint is already putting in his token for me, though I don’t like him. Greg wasn’t too happy about it when he found out.” Katie’s name was called again. “Oh, I have to go before she gets too mad.”

“Okay.”

Hermione watched Katie go down the bucket rope, holding on tight and jumping off at the end. She rested her head on her arms against the wooden windowsill, watching her go, feeling a little lonely, since she promised Titus to let Theo play with the boys his age without getting in the way. She walked back to the fluffy green couch, expanding to fit her, and collapsed on it, eyes to the enchanted ceiling, wondering what Katie meant about Trials and tokens. It bothered her that no matter how hard she searched in the library about the meaning of the Trials, she couldn’t find a single explanation.

A tug on the rope interrupted her thoughts, and the bucket began to raise. Hermione stood up, hoping it was Theo coming up.

But it wasn’t Theo. It was another boy with platinum blond hair and striking grey eyes. His skin was paler than any she’d ever seen, as if he never sat in the sunshine. Something about him tickled the edges of her memory, almost painful. He climbed out of the bucket and stood, almost taller than her.

“Goyle’s pet told me you’d be up here.”

“Do I know you?”

“You don’t remember?” He looked disappointed, lips pulled into a pout. “Well, I remember you. You killed Fenrir. It was the coolest accidental magic I’ve ever seen, and I’ve always wanted to meet you again.” He held out his hand. “My name is Draco. I want to be friends.”

They stared at each other for a few long seconds before she remembered in a visceral way.

Fenrir—the name made her ill. When she concentrated, she smelled his musky, rotten scent. He had sharp teeth and wanted to hurt her.

The boy in front of her had stood next to his monster father, pulling off his small mask. *Is that the insect?* Blood and terror. A sickening snap of a body hitting a tree. Hopper dangled from his fingers as he stared at her with scathing pity, her father’s broken body at his feet. The memories weren’t whole, but even fractured, it was enough for Hermione to recoil and lunge to the opposite side of the treehouse.

At the frantic escape, the boy tilted his head in confusion, staring at her in an intense, piercing way.

Hermione’s instincts hated this boy instantly. It came from deep inside her injured soul. The memories of him and the pain of that day mixed in odd ways, giving her a bad feeling. Now over her surprise, Hermione curled her lips in a silent snarl.

“I don’t want to be your friend. Theo’s my friend, and I don’t need another.”

Draco flinched as if she struck his face. He held his hand out for a moment longer before retracting it, and his cheeks flushed a dark red. It didn’t look as if he’d ever had anyone say something like that to him—a rejection. Hermione almost felt sorry for him, but then he gave a terrible scowl.

“You should have been *my* pet. You’re the best mudblood, and Theo doesn’t deserve you.”

“My name’s Hermione. If you ever want to be my friend, you won’t use the word mudblood *or* pet.”

Draco narrowed his eyes at her sharp tone.

“Why not? It’s what you are, isn’t it?”

The magic stirred in her veins with her anger. She felt it prickle along her skin as it traveled down her arms and into her fingertips.

“Because they are gross words, and I asked you not to use them.”

Draco seemed to think about her request. He didn’t look happy, but he nodded.

“Very well, but what else would I call you?”

“*Hermione*,” she said, exasperated. “Or, at the very least, *muggleborn*.”

Hermione stuck her nose in the air, just daring him to call her a mudblood again. She’d gotten into enough fights with Theo to know she could throw a decent punch when needed. Though if she hit Draco, she might get in a lot of trouble.

“Fine, *Hermione*.” Draco crossed his arms. “The next time I offer my friendship it would be wise for you to accept. I’ll ignore it once, since you didn’t know.”

“Why would I *ever* want to be friends with you?”

He wore a sneer to perfection, as if he created the expression.

“Because one day, you’ll be mine, so you better start being nice.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will. Father promised. The best muggleborn will be my Breeder, live in my house, and be my friend. I already know you’ll be the best, much better than Katie and Julie. There are another three girls close to our age that I’ve never met, but I don’t need to see them. I know which muggleborn I want, and I always get what I want.”

Hermione seethed. Accidental magic zipped out, lifting the edges of her hair. She just wanted this horrid boy to go away and leave her alone.

“Not this time. Theo and Titus will never let you take me.”

“Theo’s a weakling and would never beat me in the Trials. I’m already smarter and a better flyer than the lot of them.”

“You’re *not* smarter than me,” Hermione said.

“I doubt that, but I hope you’re smart. Stupid people annoy me, and I need someone to play chess with that won’t let me win.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose, but what he said appealed to her. She wanted someone to play chess with too. Theo hated the game, and Titus never had time.

“Well... maybe I could play chess with you someday, *if* you start being less bossy to me. But I don’t want to talk about breeders. It’s stupid.”

The rope pulled again, startling her out of her concentrated glare, showing someone else was coming up. This time when the bucket reached the top Theo peeked over.

“There you are,” he told Hermione, and then his eyes found Draco, widening. “What are you doing here?”

Draco stood with confidence, pulling his head up and puffing his chest out.

“I was just coming to say hello to Hermione.”

“Whatever for?” Theo jumped into the treehouse, walking next to Hermione, standing a little in front of her.

“I thought she should know I’m putting in my token as soon as I’m old enough.”

A few emotions passed Theo’s face: shock, anger, then disgust. His fists clenched by his side.

“Don’t talk to her again,” Theo said. “You’re not allowed to be alone with her.”

Draco gave a dark look that showed he could be cruel when he wanted.

“I can do whatever I want.”

“I think my brother will think differently. This isn’t your manor, Draco, and she’s mine.”

Draco stilled, and then he mirrored Theo’s stance.

“For now,” he said. “But you’re making an enemy out of me when we could be good friends, and that’s a mistake. We’ll soon be in Hogwarts together. I can make your time there terrible. Think about that.” He gave her a nod. “Goodbye, *Hermione* .”

Draco climbed in the red bucket and the rope lowered. When he got to the bottom, he stalked through the overgrown grass back to the party.

“He didn’t touch you, did he?” Theo asked.

“No... but we’ve met before.”

That surprised Theo.

“When?”

“That bad night...” Hermione didn’t need to elaborate. A long time ago, Titus sat him down and explained everything, including the identity of her father. For an entire day, Hermione thought her new brother would hate her, but Theo never was one to hold ill will toward someone that was innocent, especially since her father died too. Most days they pretended she’d lived at the manor her whole life. “Draco was there. His father was the one who... well, he surprised me up here. He’s not very nice.”

“No,” Theo said. “But you don’t need to worry about him. Whatever he told you is wrong. Titus won’t let someone like *him* get you.”

Hermione nodded, but a weight settled in her. Draco had seemed so sure, and it made her feel like Theo might be the one who’s wrong.

---

Hermione and Theo walked back to the party. Everyone was eating outside in the gardens, so they grabbed a plate and joined them. Hermione sat next to Titus on a low stone bench in front of a bubbling mermaid fountain. She leaned into his shoulder, picking at her fruit. Titus was the center of attention. All the witches and wizards listened respectfully to him as they discussed various grown-up topics, sitting in chairs positioned with their own small tables in front of them that appeared when needed and disappeared when done.

No one paid attention to her, except a man who walked over and sat down with a tumbler of whiskey. He had long blond hair, carried a cane, and she recognized him immediately as Draco’s father, the angel-monster from her nightmares. Just the sight of him made her want to vomit. She flinched when he examined her with the same hard stare Draco used. After a minute, she got mad at him for scaring her and glared at him, but he only grinned at her fierce expression, giving her a subtle wink. She twisted her face into Titus’ shoulder to make him disappear. Eventually, Malfoy’s father walked away into the gardens, along with most of the others.

“What’s wrong?” Titus asked. He looked her over carefully. “You haven’t eaten much.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Now I know something isn’t right,” he joked.

Hermione didn’t smile, staring at a strawberry. She worked on picking off the black seeds. Physical affection between them was rare, so he knew something scared her to be so close.

“Are you going to give me away?” She asked.

He froze against her.

“Who told you that?”

She shrugged.

“Is someone bothering you?” Titus reached into his pocket and took out his wand. “One of the men?”

“No,” she said, not wanting to ruin the party. “I just... I don’t want to leave you or Theo. I overheard someone say something.”

She wasn’t exactly lying.

“We all have to leave home at one point,” he said. That wasn’t a lie either, but Hermione could sense that it wasn’t the whole truth. “Look, I’ll do anything in my power to make you happy. You’ll still be with us for a long time yet.”

That cheered her a little.

“Even if Draco wanted me?” She dared to finally ask him.

Titus snapped his eyes down, forcing her to look at him.

“Did he say something to you?”

“He found me in the treehouse. He remembered me from... before.”

She saw the realization, memories flashing behind his eyes, and then his face darkened into anger, a look she rarely saw on him.

“Were you alone with him?”

“Not for long.”

“He’s not allowed to talk to you alone. I’ll remind Lucius to keep him leashed. It won’t happen again.” He nudged her with a shoulder. “Just so you know, no one would dare touch a Nott ward, even a Malfoy. They can’t hurt you without going through me first, and even Lucius is wary of my wand. Remember that. You’re safe with me.”

Hermione nodded, though her heart still warned that Titus never really answered her question.

---

Theo blew out his candles to tempered applause just as the sun dipped below the horizon. Bitty made the cake— a four-tiered piece of art with tiny edible quidditch flyers zooming around the piped frosting.

It was so beautiful it almost hurt Hermione to see Tabitha cut into it, but it tasted delicious. She got a slice that tasted like lemon drops and ate it fast, finding her appetite again.

Like Titus promised, Draco didn't talk to her anymore. His father must have said something to him, because he sat back in his chair with a scowl, eyes glued to Hermione.

Hermione ignored him, though she remained aware of the eyes piercing her, and watched Theo open his mountain of presents. The gifts the families brought were extravagant: a new broom, a whole quidditch set, and tickets to the next World Cup.

At the end, he picked up her present. He untied the ribbon, letting it fall away and opened the box.

Theo stared at the gift inside and then grinned.

"Thanks Hermione," he said. "It's perfect."

"What is it?" Greg asked.

Theo lifted out the leather necklace that Titus helped her make. On the end was a coin with a hole she drilled through the top and both their initials stamped in the middle. She found the coin on the bottom of the North Pond several years before. After cleaning it, she discovered it was a tarnished Knut four hundred years old! It might be her greatest treasure. Theo understood what it meant, but Draco didn't.

"What an ugly trinket," Draco mocked.

Hermione's face heated up, and she stared at the ground. He was right in a way. Compared to his other presents, it was stupid.

“Help me put it on.” Theo handed her the necklace. “Ignore Malfoy. It’s the best present of the day.”

All the adults had wandered off, so Hermione became brave.

“Don’t worry, Malfoy,” she said with a false smile. “I’ll never make an ugly trinket for *you* . I only do that for *friends* .”

That seemed to do the trick. His eyelids dropped in a glare. He looked once at her, and then moved his eyes to Theo, and then to the coin on the necklace. Jealous—that was the word she searched for—he looked jealous. Hermione found she didn’t care if she hurt his feelings anymore.

A boy named Blaise gave a sharp laugh.

“Your pet has a hard bite, Nott.”

“Shut up, Zabini,” Malfoy said. To her astonishment, the boy snapped his lips shut like Draco asked. “She’s not a pet, but Theo still needs to punish her more. Maybe then she’d be grateful when a proper wizard pays her attention.”

“I have no need to punish her,” Theo said. “Hermione’s very loyal and obeys my brother and Tabitha all the time. She just doesn’t like you much.”

Draco glanced around the party with distaste.

“Come on, Blaise. You too, Goyle, this is getting very boring. Let’s find something better to do.” Malfoy stood up, straightening his robes in a fastidious way.

“But I was having fun.” Greg looked adorably confused. Katie sat next to him, and he had an arm around her shoulders.

“Shut up, you idiot, let’s go.” Draco gave Hermione a look she found hard to interpret. Maybe a little hurt. It was obvious he thought today would go differently. “Theo has made his priorities very clear, and one day he’ll regret it.”

When Malfoy left to find his father, the rest of the boys did too. Greg gave an apologetic nod while walking by, and Katie waved with a friendly smile. When passing her, Blaise leaned close, so Malfoy couldn’t hear.

“Looking forward to seeing you bite again, *house pet* .” He grinned before leaving with the others. She didn’t like that boy either. Draco was mean with a sneer, but Blaise was mean with a smile, and somehow that was worse.

When they all left, she turned to find Theo glaring at the empty chairs. He looked a little sad, and it made Hermione feel bad.

“I’m sorry I ruined your party.”

“You didn’t ruin my party,” he said. “But I’m not sure Hogwarts will be very fun now, especially if I get sorted into Slytherin.”

They sat in silence.

“I wonder what house I’d have been sorted into.”

Theo paused, and then he grinned.

“Others might say Ravenclaw because you love books, but with how you just talked to Draco Malfoy, you’re definitely Gryffindor. I don’t know anybody brave enough to do that.” They both giggled, finding pleasure in the memory of Draco’s indignation. “Though don’t tell Titus that. We’re a Slytherin household. Being anything else is nearly treasonous.”

“Now that they’re gone, do you want to play Exploding Snap?” Hermione asked.

“Only if I get to go first. It is my birthday, after all.”

## Chapter End Notes

A/N: I really thought hard about how each character would turn out in this alternate universe. I came to the conclusion that in every single universe Draco would start out as a spoiled little shit.



## Chapter 5: An Ugly Trinket

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Cavetown- "Devil Town"

A big thank you to my lovely beta MyPrivateInsanity for looking over this chapter.

A year later, Theo went to Hogwarts. Hermione traveled to King's Cross Station with Titus and Tabitha, and their nanny wept the whole journey. Hermione didn't cry, but her heart ached. Her whole body trembled thinking of the separation. Who would she talk to? Who would she play with? Who would she go to with her nightmares? Titus had started a new position in the DMLE, a step below Mediator, and she never saw him, even on weekends. He came in, shoveled down food, and went to bed.

The future loneliness already weighed her down.

"You have to promise to write every day," she demanded as they walked through the station. Tabitha said it used to be crawling with muggles, bustling with noise and activity. Now it mostly remained empty, with only a few people milling around with their heads down, leaving the station quiet.

Theo rolled his eyes.

"I'm not sure I'll write *every* day, but I promise to write once a week."

Theo pushed his cart through the brick wall, and she followed, stumbling out near a long red and black train, sleek and beautiful. Steam billowed around as witches and wizards stood next to it on a platform. She saw a group of young witches laughing in a circle and looked at them with curiosity and a teensy bit of jealousy. Having not seen Katie since the party, Hermione wished to find a friend beyond Theo.

She spotted the Malfoys. Father and son stood stiffly, talking to the Crabbe family. Malfoy twisted, caught her eye, and froze, his face expressionless.

The intensity made her nervous. Hermione pulled at one of her curls. Tabitha had spent a long time getting her ready, nearly going to war with her hair. The effort paid off. Hermione liked her hair in its natural state more, but she could admit the defined curls sat nicely on her shoulders.

Ignoring Draco's piercing stare, she turned to Theo.

"I wish I could go with you."

"You would have scored top marks for sure." Theo grinned. "I don't think anyone, even the Ravenclaws, could be smarter than you."

Theo always knew just what to say to make her feel better. She threw her arms around him in a tight hug, whimpering a little into his robes– the closest she'd get to crying. Theo patted her back for comfort.

When she managed to let go, Titus took her spot, placing a heavy hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Slytherin," he said. "Repeat after me. Sly-ther-in. Tell that to the hat if it starts saying something else."

Theo rolled his eyes.

"Wait...you said Hufflepuff, right?"

Titus laughed and mussed his hair. Theo pulled back, pushing on his brother's arm. That was about as affectionate as they'd get.

Tabitha took the longest, giving his cheeks a few kisses while blubbering. Theo looked a little embarrassed but endured it because he loved her so much.

After a few more hugs, Theo walked away and disappeared into the train.

Titus put a hand on Hermione's shoulder, and she realized she still trembled, her insides cold and fragile as ice.

"It won't be forever," he said, but Hermione didn't believe him. She wanted to race after Theo and hide in his luggage.

When Hermione looked back to the train, Draco was boarding. He turned to say a final goodbye to his father, and then he caught her eye again. He tilted his head for a moment, studying her and a large grin split his face, as if the party never happened, and they were the best of friends like he wanted.

Out of reflex, she almost returned it.

---

Titus kept her tutor, so in the mornings she attended lessons as usual, but the afternoons dragged. She annoyed Tabitha and Bitty often enough the old woman snapped and told Titus

that, as her guardian, he needed to find her a companion. He gave a sheepish expression under the cloud of Tabitha's rare condemnation, promising he would.

The next day Katie arrived in the morning through the floo. Hermione squealed in delight, and Katie matched her enthusiasm.

"Why are you here?"

"Titus convinced my master and mistress to let me come to your lessons, and I've never been so excited! I've been so bored since Greg left I almost considered throwing myself into the sea."

Hermione found it hard to pay attention to her tutor. After studying and lunch, they spent the rest of the day roaming the grounds. She showed her all the cool hiding spots and how to catch tadpoles and climb the giant unicorn statue in the middle of the largest garden.

The next day, a girl named Julie arrived with her Mistress. The lady had wild dark curls—maybe even wilder than her own— and made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. An instinct prickled in her mind that something dangerous entered her space. Titus once said her name was Bellatrix Lestrange and warned Hermione *never* to anger her.

"Here you go, my sweetling," the lady said. "Behave for your professor and have fun with your new friends. I'm going to miss you."

The lady gave the girl a hug, a kiss on the cheek, and patted her strawberry blond hair before leaving.

"Hi," Julie said, blushing and twisting her foot on the ground, keeping her dark eyes lowered. "I haven't met another muggleborn before. Mum doesn't let me go out much."

"Mum?" Katie asked, a little scandalized.

"Yeah," Julie blushed. "I've always called her that. I don't remember my muggle one, but I think mum is a better one anyway. Dad told me she tried to have a baby for a long time and couldn't, which is why she's so protective. I was surprised she let me come here. But I told her a month ago I *really* wanted friends, so maybe that's why." The girl shrugged, and Hermione did as well. It didn't matter what she called her mistress. She thought of Theo as a brother, and she knew Katie thought of Greg as a brother too.

The lesson that day went slower. Julie didn't know how to write or read yet, so the professor focused on that, leaving Katie and Hermione to study together. In their free time, she showed Julie the treehouse, but the girl feared heights. And then she showed her the pond, but she squealed when she saw a bug. Hermione almost gave up finding something her new friend would like when they passed the instrument room, a place Hermione rarely went. Julie sat down at the piano and played, fingers gliding effortlessly along the keys. It was so pretty the elves stopped by with hands to their hearts and tears in their eyes.

At the end, Julie got up, gave a dramatic bow, and they all clapped. The elves kept trying to kiss her hand in their thanks.

At dinner, Hermione couldn't stop smiling. Titus was there, a rare occurrence, and noticed her good mood.

"Are you liking your studies?"

Hermione nodded.

"Good," he said, looking pleased at her answer, and took a bite of food. "It required a little persuading, but I think most of them are deciding it's a good idea. Muggleborns need socialization or else you could get depressed. And it does nobody any good if you can't read or write or understand history and simple spells. Of course, I won't allow some subjects, but the basics are acceptable."

The next day an extra tutor and two new muggleborns arrived. Justin—or Finch—showed up first. He looked a little lost without his family, and he hung out in the back without talking to anyone. She used to think him rude, but now she thought he might be shy. Another boy named Dean came too. He loved the full-sized quidditch pitch Titus had built Theo for his eleventh birthday. His master—a man named Avery—had already taught him to fly, so in their free time, he showed Katie how to command a broom. She caught on quickly— a natural— and both of them zoomed around the field until they had to leave.

"That was the best day of my life!" Katie exclaimed before leaving.

It took three days for Finch to talk to them. In a herbology lesson, the tutor asked if anyone knew about mandrakes. Finch raised his hand, giving a good explanation of how to take care of one and how to use them in potions. And then he went on a long rant about several bugs important to potions as well.

"I love bugs," he said later. "They're a little gross, but so interesting. Don't you think so?"

Now he looked nervous again, as if they would make fun of him.

"Sure, mate," Dean said. "I don't like when they surprise me, but it was cool how much you knew. You're like a walking nature encyclopedia. Come out to the pond with us later. There's plenty of gross bugs there."

The days passed this way at the newly dubbed Muggleborn School: studious mornings, fun afternoons. Dean always thought up new games, and they spent most of the day laughing at Katie's bad jokes. Julie provided her gentle smile and taught them how to play simple songs on the piano, though Hermione was tone deaf. Finch could identify any bug, and they caught a few, placing them in different magical terrariums, charmed to provide the correct environment. The labeled glass jars rested on a shelf inside the treehouse, along with any artwork they created.

No other children joined their school. Titus said the rest of the purebloods with wards their age either didn't believe in muggleborn education, or they thought getting them in groups would be bad. Not for the first time, did Hermione feel grateful to be in the Nott household, where they let her have unrestricted access to the manor library.

Of course, Hermione also read outside of class. The tutors only taught the basics like Titus promised, but Hermione wanted more. She practiced the wand movements from spell books with a stick in her room under the covers. Sometimes the magic sparked even without a real wand. Each time it happened, it surprised her, and it inspired her to try harder, going over the same spell again and again and again. And since Titus didn't prohibit any book in the library, she studied both offensive and defensive spells, charms and hexes, loving the way magic zinged under her skin.

The books she liked the most explained wandless magic. It required pooling the volatile energy to her hands, siphoning it from the rest of her body and demanded total concentration. The ancient texts explained that wandless magic was the oldest form of magic and didn't need correct words or movements—though those things helped. It only needed *intention*.

So she practiced obsessively while hidden under her covers, using her instincts and intense thirst for knowledge to wield the magic flowing like lightning in her veins. She'd practice until sweat dripped down her body, face red, muscles aching. An unending desert stretched inside her soul, and a glass of water remained just out of reach, taunting her. Hermione decided that if no one handed her the water, she'd force the liquid up through the cracks of the Earth to use as she pleased.

---

Christmas arrived within the blink of an eye, returning Theo to her. They had just opened their presents, and their gifts littered the floor, but instead of enjoying them, they rested side by side on the bed staring at the ceiling, talking about their semester apart.

He'd already told her all about the sorting ceremony and talking hat. Headmaster Snape terrified everyone, but Theo liked the other professors. He'd been sorted into Slytherin, of course, to the great relief of Titus.

"I thought for sure you'd get Hufflepuff," Titus had teased at breakfast. Theo rolled his eyes in response.

"Really it suggested Gryffindor, but it chose Slytherin in the end."

"Thank Merlin for that. I'm not sure I could have shouldered the embarrassment of having a *Gryffindor* brother."

He'd only been teasing, but Theo flinched.

She waited until they were alone to ask the question.

"Did Draco bully you?"

Theo flinched again.

"By the second night, I wished I had insisted on Gryffindor. Don't tell Titus that. He'd only worry for me."

"I hate him." Hermione wished Draco stood before her so she could punch him right in his smart mouth.

"He wasn't that bad. Just played pranks and called me names. Nothing I couldn't handle. You've pranked me worse before. I only got hurt once. Flint and the other older boys stepped in after that. They don't tolerate fighting other Slytherins, because we need to present a strong front so we can get enough house points." Theo paused and frowned. "It helps that Titus is my brother. After the bad incident, Headmaster Snape pulled Draco out of class by the ear to talk to Lucius. Since then, he's been a bit better. Still, I don't have hope it will last. Draco always manages to get around the rules."

Again, Hermione wished she had been there to help Theo. For every prank, she would have responded with a worse one. And she wouldn't have stopped until he begged her on his knees for mercy.

"Did you make any friends?"

Theo hesitated.

"There's this one Gryffindor named Harry. His father was a blood traitor but somehow got pardoned after the war, so he doesn't get picked on much. Not like his friend, Ron, whose parents were also blood traitors. Draco teases him and his siblings mercilessly. There's a million of them, and they all have red hair."

"Blood traitors! Why are they allowing those types of families in Hogwarts?"

"Well, they're children, I suppose, and they *are* purebloods. They deserve to make their own choices. Their mum managed to get pardoned as well after the great war. Their father is in Azkaban. I feel sorry for the lot of them, because they live in total poverty... though the oldest two are graduated and supposedly doing great as a curse breaker and dragon tamer."

A curse breaker and a dragon tamer. It sounded so exciting. She imagined herself on a dragon, telling it what to do, or wrestling with old, cursed objects that wanted to kill her. Muggleborns couldn't have careers. Not as a curse breaker, or a magical creature liaison, or even a filing clerk. Older muggleborns worked as in-house nannies or janitors, but not a single muggleborn went higher, besides as breeders. She shivered with a sudden sinking feeling, as if she just slipped under the ocean waves into the dark deep.

The best she could hope for was to be a breeder for a pureblood family, though she still wasn't sure exactly what they did, except it had something to do with babies. No one would tell her, and she couldn't find much about it in the library.

No, that couldn't be all she did. She'd go mad. Maybe the wizard she lived with would let her do something, *anything* besides wander a manor.

She had a secret hope it would be Titus. He'd let her do whatever she wanted, and he'd always treat her right. Her whole body flushed at the thought, remembering the time Theo showed her the photographs of people kissing. Since that time, she found it hard not thinking about how it might feel to kiss Titus.

"So you're friends with Harry?"

"Not officially, but we keep getting paired in Potions, so we naturally had to talk. He's not a bad bloke, even for a Gryffindor." He turned his head and grinned at her, showing he referenced her as well.

Hermione wondered what it would be like to attend Hogwarts with the purebloods and half-bloods. She couldn't stop the overwhelming jealousy that a prat like Malfoy could experience Hogwarts when she couldn't.

Theo sighed and stood up. He walked over to his school trunk, lifted the heavy lid, and rifled around for something.

"What are you looking for?" She sat up and pressed her feet to the floor.

"I was asked to give you a Christmas gift." He pulled out a rectangular box with a pretty ribbon on top.

"Who would give me anything?"

Theo gave her *a look*, followed by a grimace. She recoiled, knowing instantly who he referenced. There was only one pureblood trying to win her favor.

"You can tell Malfoy I don't want it. Just put it in the bin with the rest of the rubbish."

Theo frowned.

"Listen, I didn't want to give it to you, but he promised if I did, he'd let up with the pranks for the rest of the year. It doesn't have any charms or curses, and he said you'd really like it."

Hermione gave a snort, wondering what the spoiled prat thought she liked. He didn't even know her.

"Alright." Hermione groaned. Theo let out a sigh of relief that told her the bullying had been much worse than he let on. If it spared Theo pain, she'd take the stupid gift.

Theo walked over and handed it to her. Hermione ripped the ribbon away in an angry tug. On the top of the box perched a tag labeled **An Ugly Trinket** in bold black letters with his initials below. Hermione ignored that and flipped open the lid, intending to hate the gift no matter the rarity or cost.

But instead her whole world stopped and started, and her head felt woozy. If she'd been standing, she would have fainted. Inside the box, nestled peacefully in pretty paper, was Hopper, her old stuffed bunny. Hermione's face tightened in a funny way, eyes hot, and she blinked a few times. No tears fell, but they threatened to tumble down. For the first time in years, Hermione almost cried.

Theo looked stunned at her reaction.

"What is it?"

Hermione reached down and gently cradled the stuffed animal. It looked exactly like it used to, except someone cleaned him and fixed his broken eye. She clutched Hopper to her chest and hugged. A few memories broke through of her parents. They clapped while candles burned on her cake. Someone turned on a television as she curled up on the couch. Her mother sang a lullaby as she stroked her hair to get her to sleep. Her father threw her in the air, higher and higher and higher, catching her every time.

She'd forgotten too much to be homesick, but Hermione grabbed on to the fleeting thoughts, afraid they'd disappear again.

"Tell Malfoy..." Her voice caught. "Tell Malfoy thank you. He was right for once."

---

It wasn't until the next day she noticed a letter at the bottom of the box, hidden under the paper. She waited until she was alone to read it. Muggleborns weren't meant to interact with the pureblood boys without supervision, even in letter form. He risked getting in bad trouble sending it. For Hopper, she decided to honor the act by keeping it secret.

It was written on expensive paper, heavy under her fingertips, and it made a lovely sound when she unfolded it.

**Hermione,**

**Greg said I might have scared you in the treehouse, and I didn't mean to do that. I only wanted to be friends, and it went wrong somehow.**

**After you dropped your bunny so long ago, I always wished to give it back to you. If you'd like, I think we should start introductions again. Would you want to exchange letters? You couldn't tell anyone.**

**First question: would you rather be eaten by a hippogriff or a dragon? I've been thinking about it a lot lately, and I can't decide, though I'm leaning toward a dragon.**

**Your new friend,**

**DM**

Hermione didn't want to be his friend. Not after how he acted at the party, and especially not after he bullied Theo for an entire semester. But if she didn't, would he take out his anger on Theo? She might have to play along for his sake.

Hermione grabbed a quill, ink, and paper. She chewed on her bottom lip in thought before writing.

**Dear Spoiled Pureblood,**

**Thanks for Hopper. That's my bunny's name. I didn't think I'd ever see him again. Even though I'm still mad at you, I'm grateful you mended him and kept him safe.**



**I guess it wouldn't hurt to write a few letters, though if I find out you're bullying Theo again, I'll send you a howler and laugh when Headmaster Snape drags you to your father again by your ear.**

**I'd rather get eaten by a hippogriff, of course. They're honourable creatures, so they would make your death quick. Though maybe they like to savor mean bullies. Which, in your case, should be something to consider. Burning to death sounds horrid. You should honestly stop claiming you're intelligent if you choose a dragon.**

**Thanks again,**

**An Annoyed Muggleborn**

Satisfied, Hermione called over Tabitha's owl, the one least likely to be missed. She gave the owl an affectionate pat, a treat, the letter, and sent him on his way.

---

Hermione dreamed of necks splitting, blood pouring out. Of men that looked like angels but only hurt people. Of beasts with sharp teeth. She'd jolt awake, breathing hard and sweating. Before he left, she'd grab Theo's hand and hold it tight until she could return to sleep. Without him, she didn't sleep well. She stayed awake in terror, imaging the shadows as monsters in billowing black capes.

The first night after Theo left again for Hogwarts, Hermione bolted up in bed, clutching her chest. Her heart pounded hard, and she felt ill with fear. It didn't go away as she sat there, eyes wide. She wished she could cry. Maybe that would rid her of the terrible feelings.

Her fingers brushed something soft, and she pulled up Hopper from under the covers. As she hugged him close, her heart calmed, her breathing evened. Just before sleep, she buried her face into his soft belly. It smelled of something both clean and sharp. She realized it must be how Draco smelled. With that disturbing thought, she let herself smell it again, finding she liked it more than she should.

Hermione slept better than she had in a long time.

---

Titus intercepted Draco's next letter, hidden inside Theo's trunk during Easter break. He waited until after dinner when she was getting settled into bed to talk to her.

"Give us some privacy, Tabitha," he said. The old woman gave a bow of her head and exited Hermione's room, along with Bitty.

Titus gave a sigh and sat on a chair near her bed. He stuck his hand in his cloak and came out with a letter written on expensive paper.

"When did this start?"

Hermione withheld a groan. She'd been looking forward to Draco's reply. Despite not liking the boy, the conversation rested on some edge over a cavern. She had to be on her toes, and it

made it exciting.

"He only gave me one, and I sent one back. That's all."

"There shouldn't have been any. I'm willing to overlook it on your part, since I'm not sure I've explained all the rules, but Draco knows he shouldn't be doing this."

"Don't get him too much in trouble. He just wanted to be friends."

Titus kept his hard eyes on her for a moment.

"What do you know of the selection process?"

"Not much. Katie mentioned something about tokens and Trials, but I couldn't find anything in the library to explain."

The edge of his lips twitched up. He'd always told her he found her research of every topic that struck her interest endearing.

"No, I don't think you'll find this in any library." He gave a heavy sigh, glancing out the window as if he wanted to be doing anything besides talking to her about this. "The Trials won't happen until you're eighteen, or a few years later if I decide otherwise. The latest you can enter is twenty-one. Wizards will give me a token for the right to compete. There are four trials in all and whoever wins two of them will win that witch. Their tokens aren't infinite either. Each wizard only gets three in total."

"What happens if they put in all their tokens for different witches and never win?"

"Then their bloodline dies out." Titus crossed his arms on his chest. "They may have love and companionship in their lifetime, but nothing else. To some, that's a fate worse than death. So the men, especially the ones from the oldest families, take a great risk for each selection. The witch must be worth it."

"But why do it at all?"

"Muggleborns are rare. I don't think the wizarding world realized how rare muggleborns were until after the curse. Since you came to live with us, we've only found twenty muggleborns of various ages... but there are hundreds of purebloods and half-bloods vying for them. More if you include the other countries affected. The competitions were created so wizards stay civil. There would be terror and anarchy otherwise."

Hermione hesitated.

"Has anyone put in tokens for me?"

Titus studied the way she clutched her blanket under her fingers.

"Many have tried, but I'm not accepting any right now." His expression softened. "You're only twelve, and I'm not going to let just any sorry excuse for a wizard compete for you."

"Does that mean you decide who can put in tokens?"

"Since I'm head of the household, I decide who puts in tokens, and I also decide how many, though I must accept at least three. That's why you don't need to worry, Sprite. I'm not accepting any tokens from wizards you don't like. I'm willing to give you an option to decline."

That did make her feel better. Ever since Katie told her about the tokens, she worried over the meaning.

"You promise?"

He grinned.

"I promise. My standards are ridiculously high. So high no one has met them yet. The ministry will probably have to force me at wand point to finally start the trials and choose three candidates."

Since Titus was in a rare sharing mood, Hermione dared to ask the next question.

"But what are the Trials for exactly? I don't really understand everything."

He ran his hand down his face and then through his hair, making it stand on end.

"Do you remember when Theo said muggleborns can have babies?" Hermione nodded her head. "Well, that makes you both rare and a treasure. The wizarding world would die out without you. That's why wizards are willing to compete for you... to have their baby."

Babies—that's what continuing the bloodline meant.

A funny feeling filled Hermione. A mixture of pride for being so important and something uncomfortable and sad. She'd known she was to be given away, and she'd guessed the reason long ago, but to hear it confirmed made her... disappointed.

A few months before, she woke up to pain and bloody sheets. She thought she was dying until she got Tabitha. The old woman sat her down and explained the bodily function to her. It was a nuisance more than anything. She did know it meant she could technically have babies now, though Tabitha had been vague on the details. Since then, she'd made the connection, but Titus saying it out loud made her uncomfortable.

"What if you kept me? I could have your babies, and then I would never have to leave."

Titus' eyes widened, and he gave a sharp laugh. He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, cheeks coloring. She felt hers warm too, embarrassed this was his reaction.

"Do you even know how babies are made?"

She blushed.

"Well... not really."

"Oh, Sprite, one day, I'll have Tabitha explain the details about the process. After that, I doubt you'd want to have my babies."

There were still things he wasn't telling her, and she didn't like that. She crossed her arms and gave a severe frown.

"Listen, I'd have to compete for you too. It's against the rules to just keep you. I'd do anything to make you happy, but I can't let you skip the Trials. It's against the law. Do you understand?"

Hermione gave a little nod of her head, uncrossing her arms.

"Yes."

His stance loosened, as if he'd been worried she'd be more upset.

"Which brings us back to this." He held up the letter. "Draco not only bullies Theo, but he has the audacity to send you a letter behind my back. He's of age to put in a token for the future, and his father has tried several times to convince me. There was a moment I considered... Draco's your age. He's top of his class. And there's very few families that can protect you on the same level as I can." He grimaced. "But I'm denying him the right to give a token. Maybe one day he can prove different, but I can't overlook this."

Hermione wasn't sure how to feel about the whole thing. There were still questions she didn't know about her future, which would probably help her understand enough to be happy or sad.

"I understand," she said.

Titus nodded but he looked hesitant and sighed.

"Theo admitted Draco gave you a gift." He outstretched his hand. "I hate to ask this, but I'm going to need it back."

Hermione slipped her hand under the cover, brushing the matted fur of Hopper.

"No."

Titus crinkled his brows in surprise, and it surprised her too. She had never told him no like that.

"I'm going to give you a moment to reconsider your answer. This is unlike you."

"It's mine." Hermione brought out the old, ugly bunny. "I dropped it in the mud when Fenrir—Draco only sent it back. Please don't take it. I don't— I don't have nightmares when I hold it."

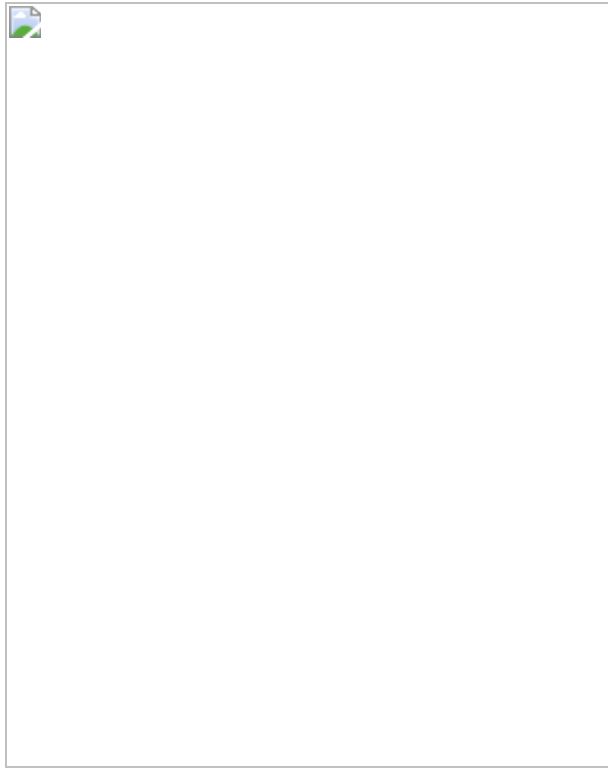
Titus froze and then lowered his head, looking ashamed for a reason she couldn't identify.

"I won't take it." He stood up, straightening his robes. After walking to the door, he turned with a gentle smirk on his face. "By the way, you were right. A hippogriff is a better choice."

In this letter, Malfoy was explaining the virtues of a dragon. I'm sure his response would have only annoyed you."

Stupid dragons and stupid Draco. The conversation with Titus was meant to soothe her worries, but it only unsettled her more.

Art by [Frau Blucher \(Theo and Hermione\)](#).



## Chapter 6: Reclamation of Magic

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Heilung- "Anoana" The music video has a lot of symbolism that represents this story, especially with reconnecting to deep roots and old magic.

Muggleborn Boys: It will be explained later, but there were lots of questions, so I'll answer. Muggleborn boys will provide the same service as the girls, except to families who only have female heirs (the Greengrass sisters). It's a patriarchal society, and they don't get married anymore, so this is considered a last resort to continue the family. The infertility is magical (attached to the bloodlines), not biological, so the pureblood men are affected by the curse just as much as the women. The only difference is the boys are not put into the Trials. Instead, they are bought for a substantial sum, since there is less of a demand for them. The logistics of the curse will be discussed in a later chapter as well.

Edited by the wonderful MyPrivateInsanity

The summer before Theo's fourth year, Hermione walked out of Florean Fortescue's, licking a giant scoop of Butterbeer flavoured ice cream, perched precariously on a cone.

Theo walked beside her with his own cone, eating it happily. They found a bench, and Hermione sat, curling up her legs and enjoying the sunshine.

Hermione tried to keep her smile after finishing the ice cream, but the auror Titus hired to follow them around dampened the mood. They'd been everywhere they were pre-approved to go, and Hermione struggled to find things to do.

"I'm bored," she complained.

Theo frowned, but she knew he was too. The mid-summer heat lingered in the air, enticing them outside, but nothing inside or outside captured their attention.

Hermione got an idea that sent a thrill down her back—something she'd always wanted to do. She leaned in toward Theo.

"Let's go to Knockturn Alley."

Theo twisted his head hard.

"Are you insane?" he whispered back.

"You can't say you've never been curious. I know you've wanted to go ever since Titus said we couldn't."

Theo scrunched his eyebrows, and she knew she convinced him.

"Titus will never let us."

"Titus isn't here."

"Yeah, but his guard dog is."

Both of them looked up to see the auror standing nearby. The man tried to act casual, but everyone who passed understood the danger he posed. Taller than most men, he clasped a wand in his hand, and a giant scar slashed down his right cheek.

"I don't think it would be too hard to outsmart him," she said.

Theo gave one look back at the auror and then grinned at Hermione.

"What do you have in mind?"

---

"You can't be alone with me." Hermione walked to a secluded part of the bookstore, dealing with dry law text. Dust coated the books, showing the lack of interest from the public.

The auror frowned. Theo had gone to the loo a few minutes earlier, leaving just the two of them.

"Then head back the other way."

"No." Hermione gave a spoiled tilt of her chin. "I want to look at these books. It just so happens *you* can't be near me on your own without supervision."

"Listen, little girl, your master—"

"I'll scream."

He glowered and looked around, weighing his options.

"Very well," he said. "You have five minutes. Browse fast. After you're done, Titus wants me to escort both of you home."

That confused Hermione.

"But he told me he'd pick us up?"

"Plans changed. Five minutes."

The moment he disappeared around the corner Hermione headed the other way, slipping along the bookshelves, keeping her footsteps light. For a moment, the auror turned the wrong way, eyes scanning the stacks, and Hermione thought she'd get caught, but then he twisted back around. She took quick steps past him, holding her breath until she exited the bookstore. Theo waited for her outside with a goofy smile.

"Took you long enough."

"Next time *you* can escape an auror, and we'll see how long it takes. Quick, let's go before he figures it out."

After running for a minute, dodging old ladies holding shopping bags, Theo tugged her into an alcove. They laughed until their stomachs ached.

"I can't believe we just did that," Theo said. "Titus will kill us."

"Titus will never know."

"How will he not? Soon the auror will notice us missing."

"He won't tell Titus. He'd lose his job. Even if the auror finds us, he won't say a word. We'll make a deal with him."

Theo just stared at her with his head tilted.

"Maybe I was wrong before." He grinned. "This is awfully Slytherin of you, Hermione."

"I've learned from the best."

---

They took the west entrance to Knockturn Alley. Most people avoided Knockturn Alley in general, but if they did enter, they went the east way. No one entered the west side because the muggleborn camps were set up along the outskirts, and most wizards would rather avoid the area. Hermione would too, but it was the best way to enter without detection.

Theo looked around warily.

"I don't feel so good about this."

"Didn't the hat consider you for Gryffindor? I thought you'd be braver than this."



Theo scowled.

"This is stupid, not brave."

The clean streets of Diagon Alley vanished as they travelled. Trash littered the path, and flickering graffiti desecrated the old stone walls. Voices lowered to hushed whispers, and the wizards they passed gave them longer, more predatory looks. Hermione glanced around. Maybe Theo was right, but she was too far in to back out now.

"I just want to see it, and then we can leave."

Theo gave a huff of exasperation.

"Fine, but let's not stay long."

They crept along the road until it twisted. There was no flashing sign, no clear demarcation, but they both knew they crossed into Knockturn Alley. They hesitated until someone screamed in one of the run-down buildings, and then Hermione quickened her pace.

They followed the twisting alley until it opened into a clearing where a building once stood. Jagged pieces of stone piled on the ground. Shanties made of salvaged building wreckage and ragged pieces of cloth were pieced together near the back of the clearing.

Hermione paused, mouth open. She'd never seen anything like it. The hard-looking men and women stood around in torn clothing, dirty and smelling bad even from where she stood. Most looked older, wrinkles encrusted with dirt. They either sat around or hovered over smoking pots of stew. Dead animals were strung up on a long line, including a few rats.

There weren't any children to be seen. How could people live like this?

Hermione's stomach twisted. These were the older muggleborns. No wonder purebloods called her mudblood, if these were the pitiful creatures she came from.

Theo noticed her subdued mood. "Are you alright?"

He noticed what she stared at.

"Oh," he whispered. "I told you this was a bad idea. Let's go. You don't need to see this."

They turned, but something blocked their path. Out of the shadows stepped three men. The first was dressed in filthy rags, with a lecherous smile on his face, missing two teeth and patches of hair. The second had on leather clothing with blazing red hair, freckles, and tattoos down his arms. He didn't leer like the other, but Hermione stepped back from his sheer size.

The third was the auror they ran from. He frowned at them, the scar contorting on his face.

"Is this them?" The redhead asked.

"Yes," the auror said, face still in a grimace. "The girl is clever. I thought I'd never find an opening to act. And when they escaped, I thought they suspected me. Turns out they just

made it easier."

"Suspected you of what?" Theo tensed and grabbed Hermione, shoving her behind him. He pulled out his wand, but he was clearly no match for three grown wizards.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said. "It was my fault. When we return to Titus, I'll tell him it was my idea. He knows I—"

Hermione understood she got everything dreadfully wrong. These men weren't planning to bring her back to Titus at all. A horrible realisation infected her.

"You're The Order," she accused the auror. "Titus never told you to escort us home. You were going to kidnap me."

"She's a smart one, alright." The one in rags mocked, displaying his rotting teeth.

"Stop scaring them." The redhead turned his attention to Hermione. "We're here to rescue you."

"Rescue me?" Hermione couldn't comprehend what he meant. "What do I need rescuing from? Please, just leave us alone, and I promise we'll forget all about it. I'm giving you a chance to escape, because if you take me, Titus will hunt you down and slaughter you all."

The man in dirty rags burst into laughter, and the redhead looked very defeated and sad.

"You see now why they take them young?" The auror looked a little sad too. "They don't even know they're in a cage. They'll put the collar on themselves, believing their families love them, until it's too late."

"They do love me!" Hermione clutched Theo's arm tighter. She now wished she had listened to Titus when he warned her of this situation. She always thought him overprotective, but if she ever got back, she'd never disobey him again.

"You might think that now," the redhead said. "But to them you're like cattle. You serve a purpose, but they'll discard you when you're no longer of use." He motioned to the muggleborn camps behind her. "You can't love a person you treat like a dog."

"Shut up," Theo roared. His glasses fell down his nose, but he didn't dare push them back up. "You're a liar. "

The auror pointed his wand at Theo.

"Now son, we don't want to harm you. Hurting children is against our code. The best thing to do is to step aside and let the girl come with us. I'm afraid we'll have to obliviate you as well. Like the girl said, we can't risk Nott hunting us down, so we'll only erase our faces. We'll even return you to Diagon Alley, safe and sound for your brother to find."

"No," Theo said. "If you want her, you'll have to kill me first."

The auror sighed.

"Expelliarmus!" Theo cried, but it was easily swatted aside.

"Decent aim for your age, but ineffective. Sorry kid."

A blue light exited his wand, and Theo slammed into a side wall, his head giving a small crack with the impact and crumpling forward unconscious. His wand flew in the air and clattered at Hermione's feet.

"Theo!"

Her brother groaned but didn't get up.

She made a noise of terror, both for Theo and for herself, but she had no time to worry because the auror walked carefully toward her with both hands up.

"Now, now, I know you're scared. You don't need to be. We aren't here to hurt you. Your friend will be perfectly fine, and you'll be safely out of here in no time."

He thought she'd bolt, but the anger crashed and roared in her chest, and she reached down and grabbed Theo's wand. When her hand connected to the wood, her whole body froze and then relaxed. The magic attached like a friend.

*Ah, her body cried. At last.*

She held it toward the redhead in a natural pose. After watching Titus cast spells for years, she'd been careful to copy the movements.

The auror paused, but then he gave a grin.

"Your father would be proud," he said, and Hermione tensed with the word. What did he know of her father? "You're a fighter and smart too. But we both know you have no idea what to do with that. They've never given you a real wand, and they never will. If you come with us, we'll get you one and train you to use it. I promise."

The words both taunted and enticed her. The thought of a wand in her hand—her own wand—would have made her reconsider, if the cost of leaving was less. But it wasn't worth the price of never seeing her family again.

"I know how to use it," Hermione bluffed. "I've killed before too."

"Yes," the auror nodded. "Fenrir. It's why they want you so badly. It's a horrid curse to them that they can only reproduce with muggleborns, but it makes it more acceptable if the girl snapped a werewolf's neck at the age of seven. Imagine the power you could give their children. All the old families want you. I overhear the discussions daily as the pureblood patriarchs try to entice Titus into allowing their tokens. I'll admit he's been a hard sell, because only the best connections will make the cut. They treat it like the old marriages, selling off young girls to form political alliances. You won't be exempt from this."

"You're lying."

Titus promised she had a choice. She had an important position in society, and her family loved her. This man made it seem like they only looked at her like an object to be gifted or sold.

"Am I?" The auror frowned. "You know I'm right... you just wish I wasn't. Nott will send you off to the Trials as soon as you're of age. He'll get a hefty sum from your new handlers for the right to force you into their bed, whether you want to or not. It's nothing but human trafficking and sexual slavery. You'll spend your life getting fucked—"

"Garner," the redhead warned. "She's a kid."

"She's old enough to understand the consequences of staying."

"Enough talking. We can explain everything when we get back to the base. She's not going to come quietly. She's too brainwashed. Just stun her and let's go."

The auror sighed, as if his years weighed on him.

"It doesn't have to be this way." He pointed his wand at her.

She responded instinctively, her body and brain going with the rote motions she practised repeatedly under the covers, words whispered in the dark.

"Petrificus Totalus."

The magic zipped through her, and the spell hit the surprised wizard. He snapped up, froze, and like a giant, old tree, crashed into the stone below.

"Bloody hell," the redhead said. He glanced at Hermione in shock.

The filthy wizard just laughed harder like a deranged lunatic.

The redhead drew his wand and pointed it at Hermione just as a giant light hit the sky and widened into an announcement, showing a big picture of her face with the words MISSING above it. A loud siren erupted around them, and a voice boomed telling everyone to stay where they were, and that armed aurors would be in the streets.

Titus knew they were missing, and he was searching! She wondered how long it would take for him to locate her. By the redhead's expression, he wondered the same thing.

"Fuck," the red-headed wizard cursed. He continued to point his wand at Hermione, but she just glared and pointed Theo's right back.

"I'm not someone to mess with. If you want me, I won't make it easy. I'll kill again if I have to."

It helped that they had no idea what she was capable of.

"I see that." The wizard hesitated, gave a nod of respect, and started to leave. "One day I hope you change your mind. I have a feeling we'll meet again."

"Wait," the filthy wizard said. "We're not just going to leave them both, are we?"

The redhead hesitated, glancing down at his partner. He almost leaned down, but then he grimaced and straightened, as if he resisted all instinct. He looked haunted.

"The mission is more important than our lives. Garner knew this and agreed to the code before taking the job. I'd expect him to leave me if the roles were reversed. They've already disabled apparition. We can't carry out an unconscious wizard without risking suspicion. Even if I reverse the spell, he'll be knocked out cold from that fall, and there's no time to subdue the girl without hurting her. We'll get her a different time."

"But the money—"

"Fuck the money. Titus is on a warpath now, and he's not a wizard I'd like to duel. You haven't seen him in action, but I have. He'd rip your guts out and make you wear them as jewellery. Come on."

The redhead turned around and vanished into the darkness behind him, but the filthy wizard stayed.

"They promised me a nice, fat bag of galleons if I brought you in, and I'm not going to let a little girl stop me." He pulled out his gnarled wand. "Now put down the wand, or else I *will* hurt you."

Terror tangled her veins, understanding the sharp danger in front of her. The other wizards possessed an honour code, but this one didn't.

"Incarcerous," she yelled, but now that surprise was gone, the wizard deflected it with ease, his ugly leer punctuated by missing teeth.

"Is that all, precious?"

He threw a nonverbal dark red curse. Hermione managed a weak Protego, but it took a lot of energy out of her. If that curse had hit her, she'd be in a lot of pain.

Hermione breathed hard, shivering, knowing she was strong enough to beat him, but lacked the knowledge and practice to protect herself. The wand liked her, but it resisted her a little, since its allegiance belonged to Theo.

"Come on, mudblood. Drop the wand before you really get hurt."

She pointed her wand at the terrible man, wanting to harm him. The magic built.

"Reducto!"

The wizard attempted to shield it, but it glanced off and hit his finger, exploding the tip off. Flesh and blood splattered everywhere. The wizard cried out with a howl and cradled his hand to his chest, giving a violent look to Hermione.

"Little bitch, you'll fucking regret that." He sent an Expelliarmus, and Hermione couldn't stop it. The wand flew out of her hand, landing near Theo, too far for her to reach.

Like a lightning flash, another red spell hurtled toward her. She jumped out of the way, but it sliced her side. A deep red bloomed against her white robes. She gave a low scream in pain, grabbing her wound, attempting to stop the blood. It felt like it hit something important inside her stomach.

"Oh, did that hurt?" he mocked. "Time to go, precious. Before I give you to the Order, we're going to take a little detour. I'm planning to take the same thing you took from me, but slower. Maybe we'll have other kinds of fun too. The girls your age always scream the best. Don't worry, I'll patch you up before leaving you. Good as new." His eyes flicked up and down her body in a way she didn't understand, but it made her feel like bugs marched along her skin.

He walked forward as if to grab her, and Hermione once again reacted instinctively, remembering all the times she practised controlling magic with only her will and a stick. Every last ounce of energy in her body pooled into her hand. There was no set spell, no ancient words, no flick of a wand. She held out her hand like the pagans of old, ordering her magic with sheer will.

She twisted her hand, and the man's whole body locked up.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Another flick of her wrist, and his own bloodied hand put the tip of his wand to his temple. His hand trembled and so did hers with the effort. Sweat rolled down her neck.

"Confundo," she ordered. She attempted to send her own magic through his wand as a conduit like she had read, but the old magic she attempted was too advanced and too much for her body. She held it only for a moment more, and then the magic dissipated.

The man looked at her fearfully now, trembling as he pointed his wand at her. He could kill her or hurt her, and she had no more energy to stop it. Hermione closed her eyes and grit her teeth, attempting to be brave for what was to come.

"Avada Kedavra!" A green light struck the filthy man, and he collapsed. The wand rolled out of his hand, and his eyes stared at her unseeing.

Hermione fell to her knees, stunned at the sudden turn of events. Blood leaked through her clothes and dripped down her skin—too much to be safe—and the wound burned. Whatever the man cast was serious. Black spots obstructed her vision, but she was conscious enough to see Lucius Malfoy walk out of the shadows with Draco beside him, looking pale.

"She's hurt!"

"She'll live. Of that, I'll make sure." Lucius sent a healing spell to her. It helped stitch the wound, but she'd still need to see a healer soon.

The blond man glanced at the unconscious auror on the ground and at the filthy wizard's severed finger. He raised an eyebrow, giving an odd, delighted smile.

"For someone that's never held a wand, you put on an impressive show. Either you're a natural, or you've been a naughty girl. I suspect it's both, for you to be able to do complicated wandless magic at fourteen years old." He shook his head, but he looked pleased, and Hermione didn't know why. "I knew you'd be powerful when you aged, but you've already exceeded my expectations."

She wondered how long he had stayed in the shadows before intervening.

The darkness took over, and she sank lower into the stone. Her eyes fluttered open just enough to see Lucius bend down and pick her up, cradling her to his chest. It oddly comforted her, despite him being her father's killer and a prominent figure in her nightmares.

"You smell like Draco," she said in her delirium, remembering the clean, sharp scent on Hopper. The older Malfoy frowned and gave a furious glance to his son.

"I'm going to pretend she never said that, and you better hope Titus never heard her say something similar. You're old enough now that he won't think it's innocent."

Draco looked so adorably confused it would have made Hermione smile if she wasn't in so much pain.

Lucius renewed the spell on the auror, and both he and an unconscious Theo jolted into the air. The senior Malfoy began to walk down the dark alley, the bodies drifting after him.

"Pay close attention, son," he said. "I'm about to show you an important life lesson."

"What's that?"

"How to capitalise on chaos."

Hermione knew no more.

## Chapter 7: Blackmail and Demands

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: The Prince of Egypt Soundtrack– "All I Ever Wanted" (with Queen's Reprise)

A BIG thank you to my Beta, MyPrivateInsanity!

Hermione's eyes fluttered open just as she was placed on the dining room table. A stab of pain lanced through her left side. It burned more than a cut should.

"Am I dying?" she asked Titus. He stood over her with an expression she'd never seen on him—an intense mixture of fear and fury.

"I won't let you, Sprite."

He took off her top robes, shoving up her bloodied white shirt to reveal the wound. Shaking fingers ghosted over the jagged skin, held together by the first aid spell.

"They're going to regret this." Titus bent down his head, grimacing at the ground. "The streets will run red with blood. They'll cry for mercy, and I won't give it."

A healer came through the floo in her heavy robes and serene expression. Titus towered over her.

"Keep her alive, or I'll end you too."

The serene expression dropped with a wince. Titus stepped away as the woman began her spells, and Hermione slipped back into darkness.

---

"There are things we need to discuss."

Lucius' voice woke her up. Hermione guessed she was in her room, judging by the soft mattress. She didn't open her eyes, knowing an important conversation was happening. She wondered what they would say without knowing she listened.

"Can't this wait?" Titus sounded stressed. "I'll make sure you're rewarded for finding her, but I want you to fuck off right now."

"Wait for what? The boy is sleeping in his room. The girl is healing. There are no pressing matters."



"My thoughts are not in the right place for negotiations."

"I'm not going to negotiate."

Silence. Titus shifted in the chair. Hermione dared to peek out of the barest slit of her eyelid. Only Lucius and Titus were in her room. She reclosed her eyes, oddly disappointed Draco wasn't there.

"What do you want?" Titus asked. It sounded forced like he said it through clenched teeth.

"The girl can do magic."

Titus scoffed.

"Is that supposed to be news? Of course, she can. Accidental magic happens around her all the time. She's a *witch*."

The click of a cane echoed against her bedroom walls.

"This was far from accidental."

Again, silence. This time heavier.

"Explain."

"Are you saying I know something about your ward that you don't?"

"Stop with the games, Lucius. There's a point you want to make, so I suggest you make it before I lose my temper. The only reason I'm entertaining you right now is because you were the one who found her."

"It will do well for you to remember that," Lucius warned. "When I arrived, the girl had just produced a decent Protego with Theodore's wand... and then proceeded to cast a Reducto that took off the man's finger. I'm fairly certain she petrified the auror too."

More silence.

"There's no way that's possible. She's never held a wand in her life."

"I'll show you my memories if you wish."

That must have convinced him.

"Bloody hell," Titus cursed, then something shattered. She assumed he threw his tumbler. "If the ministry figures out she can do magic with a wand, they'll—"

"Take her away," Lucius finished. It came out as a threat. Hermione struggled to keep her eyes closed and her breathing even. "They'll consider you an unfit guardian. You're lucky Kingsley destroyed the trace when he turned traitor, or she might have been discovered already."

She didn't want to be taken away. She regretted her late-night wand practice, her relentless pursuit of magic. Hermione didn't know the consequence would mean she'd be ripped from Theo and Titus.

"Luckily, Draco and I were the only ones who witnessed this. Well, a few muggleborns did too, but I managed to fix that easy enough."

Fix that? She wondered what he meant. The thought of the dirty, skinny muggleborns eating rats gave her an odd feeling. One she didn't know how to place. It caused an acute discomfort deep inside her soul. It stuck to her insides, no matter how hard she tried to shake it loose.

"Thank you." His voice was strained. More than before.

"I didn't do it for free."

"What's your price?"

Another click of a cane, as if Lucius adjusted his stance.

"Accept Draco's token."

"Fuck, fine. I'll let the little wanker compete when it comes time. Is it worth the risk of blackmailing me, Malfoy?"

"She's extraordinary. There's no other muggleborn like her. In fact, there's nary a witch like her. Even among the Purebloods, she stands out."

"I can agree with you on that." Titus sucked in a quick breath, and then his voice lowered into something serious. "I'm not sure how she managed to learn to do magic with a wand, but I promise I'll discover the source and end it."

Lucius only laughed. It sounded mocking.

"Don't bother. Let the girl learn, just keep it quiet. If something like this happens again, she should be able to protect herself. Once the Order learns about her abilities and power, they'll stop at nothing to obtain her. Besides, you could break every wand around her, and it wouldn't stop her."

"I'm not following."

"The girl doesn't *need* a wand to do magic."

The legs of the chair scraped as Titus stood straight up.

"What you're suggesting is impossible. She's fourteen, and she's had no training."

"Which makes it all the more incredible. She's clever enough to discover what she needs, even if you never gave it to her. I'm guessing she's been utilizing your library to its fullest potential. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it either. I almost stepped in after the wizard expelled her wand, but then she lifted her hands, and the

man *froze*." He paused to let it sink in. "She made the wizard put his *own* wand to his temple and tried to cast a Confundo *through* his wand. It didn't work this time, but give it a few more years..."

Titus began to pace. She heard his boots scuffing the hard wood floors.

"What you're suggesting is... is on Dumbledore's level. On Shacklebolt's level. On *Voldemort's* level. How am I supposed to handle that?"

"It's simple," Lucius drawled. "You oversee her training, so the magic doesn't turn against her. I've heard of strong wizards going mad without a substantial outlet. Most of the muggleborns will get enough through the ministry-blunted wands they get at fifteen, but the girl will need more. If you give her just enough, you can control her power. Leave her to her own devices, and she might grow hard to control, even for you."

Titus seemed to be thinking in the pause.

"A trip to Ollivanders?"

"Normally, I'd be opposed to it, but, in this case, there is no choice. She'll need a wand for her magical level. Just control the information she receives. We wouldn't want an intelligent muggleborn with the power of Dumbledore to gain access to dangerous spells. Just enough, Nott, just enough."

Hermione stopped her instinctive recoil. She didn't know if she wanted to rage at the fact that they both wanted to control her knowledge, or if she deserved to lose it after almost getting Theo killed. There'd be no more late-night practice with a stick and her will, studying whatever she wished, reading any book. The thought of it being taken away left her empty.

Titus stopped pacing. She assumed he stared at Lucius.

"For your silence, I'll allow Draco to put in a token. If there's nothing else, I want you to leave my home."

"Oh, you'll do more than that."

"What else?" The words were hard as iron.

"I want a guarantee he'll win."

Hermione heard the shuffle of feet toward Lucius in obvious anger, but Lucius didn't retreat.

"What you're asking for is cheating."

"No, it's ensuring my bloodline continues with the best witch available. I'm not letting a game decide such an important thing. Don't pretend the others don't rig the games for the highest buyer. What I'm offering guarantees everyone wins. In the meantime, I want you to allow a few letters a year from Draco. My son has grown fascinated with the girl, but it's important the girl develops loyalty to him, so fostering a relationship is paramount."

A little thrill went through her when thinking of getting letters from Malfoy again, though she didn't know if she wanted him to win her Trial. She didn't like cheating, and she definitely would *not* be loyal to the spoiled prat.

"You go too far."

"I'm not asking you to leave them alone together. You can even oversee their correspondence. He won't touch her before it's time. It will simply ensure a healthy transition into the Malfoy household. We've both seen witches fight and scream on the ritual night. It's not pleasant. Do you want that for Hermione?"

Ritual night? It sounded ominous and made her stomach swoop low with nerves. Just like anything to do with the Trials, she doubted she'd get any information from the library or Titus. She'd somehow need to discover it for herself.

Titus hesitated, like what he asked was almost painful.

"Even if she knows the boy, I doubt it will still be a pleasant experience."

"No," Lucius agreed. "But at least, if she develops a level of trust, the night will go easier."

"Alright... two letters a year." Titus collapsed in a chair. "Anything else? My left kidney, perhaps?"

She could almost swear she heard Lucius roll his eyes.

"You can keep your organs," Lucius said. "I just want the girl. For that, you'll have my silence."

A door opened and closed, and Lucius walked out. Hermione tried to keep even breathing. She stayed in that suspended tension until Titus let out a loud sigh.

"Go back to sleep, Hermione," Titus said. "We'll talk tomorrow."

Titus walked to the door, opened it with a hard jerk, and slammed it behind him.

---

She woke up to a warm hand on her forehead. She tried to sit up, but the same hand pressed down on her shoulder.

"Not now, my girl. The healer just left and said you needed to stay in bed for at least a day. That dark cutting curse hit your spleen. Any deeper and... well, nothing was permanently damaged, thank Merlin."

Her fuzzy eyesight cleared. Tabitha sat over her, giving her a look full of love. She was in her own room still, but now it was daylight.

"Oh, my poor dear." She ran a cool hand down her cheek. "How scared you must have been. Two teenagers against three armed wizards. It's a miracle you're here and alive."

"I'm okay," Hermione assured her old nurse maid before she could start crying. Tears always made her uncomfortable.

But it only seemed to make Tabitha more upset.

"The thought of you or Theo getting hurt—" She fluffed and tucked her thin blankets in a ridiculous way.

"I promise I won't freeze to death," Hermione said.

"I guess you are feeling better if you're back to your cheeky comments. Get some rest, dear." Tabitha gave a final, teary smile and exited.

That was when she noticed Titus. He stood against the wall with his hands in his pockets. The light from the window hit him just right, making his blue eyes glow. The sun's rays showed off the subtle auburn streaks within his dark hair. His expression was neutral, but she still tensed, knowing she had disobeyed him.

"You're not going to cry too, are you?" Hermione asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"Merlin, no."

A smile tugged up the side of his lips, but it fell.

"Is—" she began. "Is Theo okay?"

"More than fine. He's been milking the injury. I think he's just trying to make me feel sorry for him, so he doesn't get punished."

Hermione swallowed hard, throat dry. She needed water and food, but she knew this conversation came first.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It was my fault. I convinced Theo—"

"Theo knew better. Don't excuse his behavior. I'm angry at the both of you. You could have been killed," it came out as strained. "Do you know how it felt, knowing you were missing? Don't ever do something stupid like that again."

Hermione nodded. She pulled out her hands and stared down at them, knowing more was coming.

"Why didn't you bring me to St. Mungo's?"

"There was a breach in security at the hospital from the Order. It was meant to pull my attention away from your kidnapping, but the second auror I sent to bring you home couldn't find you. I didn't have time to secure the hospital, so the manor was the safest place to heal you."

Hermione's heart pounded as she brought up the next subject. He'd ask her anyway, so she felt the need to start the conversation.

"You know about my magic?"

Titus gave a sharp nod. He examined her then, as if he'd never seen her before.

"I know Lucius' story, but I don't trust it." He gave her a pointed stare. "I'm going to have to see your memories." He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, facing her. The mattress dipped with his weight. He pulled out his wand and put it to her temple. "I hate doing this. It will hurt, but I have to see everything."

Hermione steeled herself as Titus dove into her mind. It took a moment, but he arrived at the ice cream shop. He followed them through the bookstore. The whiplash of memory made her ill, and it began to hurt, but he continued watching as they raced through the streets and into Knockturn Alley. What came next tumbled her stomach, having to relive every awful word, the pain, the terror.

When he finally pulled out, Hermione leaned over and vomited on the ground. She groaned and laid back, clutching her head to soothe the pain. The world spun around her.

"Sorry Sprite, but it had to be done."

He allowed her to recover, cleaning her vomit, and wiping her curls from her forehead. When she finally regained her bearings, she looked over to find Titus sitting in the chair, resting his chin on his knuckles in deep thought.

"If Garner did as he originally planned, it might have worked. I probably wouldn't have found you. So even if you did do something stupid, it saved you both from a worse fate."

He blew out a hard breath through his mouth and pressed his knuckles to the middle of his eyes. Then he sat up and leaned back in his chair.

"The redhead is Charlie Weasley, an exceptional dragon trainer. I worked with him a few months ago when we needed help with some magical creatures. Even considered him a friend. His parents were blood traitors, but I always thought—" He shrugged, looking disappointed. "I guess some things run in families."

"Did you find him?" She knew he must have already extracted Garner's memories.

"No," he answered. "His favorite Hungarian Horntail is missing too. I doubt we'll find him any time soon."

A part of Hermione hoped they didn't find him. Titus would kill him, and he didn't seem violent, even if he did work for the Order. Maybe they could change his mind and convince him the Order was wrong.

"What will happen to the auror?"

A dark look passed his face. She rarely saw him this cold.

"Garner had a false tooth filled with poison to commit suicide, but I cured it before it could kill him. Weasley should have ended him instead of leaving him alive. His mistake will cost him."

She wondered if that was what the redhead hesitated about moments before leaving. Had he been tasked to kill the others if things went south? The thought made her ill.

The auror scared her, and he hurt Theo, but she didn't want him dead, not like she did with the filthy one. She looked down at the blanket. Something felt a little broken inside her chest.

"Can you promise you won't hurt him?"

"I wish I could appease your soft heart, but I won't promise that."

She breathed out, knowing she couldn't argue with Titus when he was determined like this.

"Are you angry with me?"

She looked up to find him grinning at her.

"I'm so fucking proud of you." He got up and walked over, once again resting on the edge of the mattress. "A highly-trained auror—one of the best—and you brought him down with a single spell. You faced down the other wizards with courage, protecting both yourself and Theo." He paused, as if unsure how to word what he wanted to say. "Garner told you many lies. You aren't a slave, Hermione. You're loved by this whole household, and your home is here." He looked serious. "You need to know that so no one else makes you question who you are to me."

Hermione's heart warmed as he talked. The bad feeling in her chest lifted a little. What the auror had said did bother her, but it helped to know Titus cared for her. She was important to him and to wizarding kind. The Order was wrong for trying to take her. She belonged at Nott Manor.

She glanced around, taking in all of her possessions—the accumulation of her life. Her expensive clothes were displayed in the wardrobe, and the vanity sparkled with her jewelry and a mother-of-pearl hairbrush. The Puffskein rug was situated under a fluffy chair in the corner for reading next to a giant bookcase of her personal favorites. Pictures that she'd taken with her new camera hung on the wall. In the nearest one, Theo and Titus waved at her from beside the pool.

Titus didn't think of her like a dog. He loved her. And if the Order thought they could take her again, then they'd find her as ferocious an adversary as Titus.

Hermione reached out and grabbed his hand. It was large and calloused from years of quidditch, hard work, and dueling. Something fluttered in her stomach, but she ignored it. Titus gave a gentle squeeze and extracted his hand.

"Do I even need to ask how you learned to cast with and without a wand?"

Hermione pushed down her smirk and looked out the window.

"I've been reading magical theory, and I practice at night with a stick."

Titus gave a deep belly laugh.

"You're something else, Sprite." He reached out and tugged on a curl, and she shoved his hand away playfully.

Hermione hesitated a moment before asking the next question.

"Will you let Draco win like you promised Lucius?"

"Absolutely not. No one manipulates me and gets away with it. But for now, I think it's best if we play along."

"Do I have to be nice to him?"

He gave another loud laugh.

"Please don't. Someone needs to put him in his place."

"I don't like Lucius."

Titus rolled his eyes.

"No one likes Lucius. Not even Lucius likes Lucius."

She laughed at that. Titus paused, eyes roaming her face.

"As for your punishment... I'm going to ban you and Theo from Diagon Alley for the rest of the summer."

Hermione groaned. They would be so bored, but it was only fair, she supposed.

"I'm sorry I scared you." She nestled back into her bed. Her side twinged. Dark magic took longer to heal. "And I'm sorry I went to Knockturn Alley. I didn't think the Order would—I thought they weren't real, like a fairytale. Now I know they're terrible. They wanted to take me from you." Hermione choked on the last word, the closest she'd come to crying.

"You don't need to fear them," he said, voice going lower. "They need to fear me. After this, I plan to become their nightmare. Their mothers will weep for their mistake." He gave a single touch of his finger to her cheek. "Get some sleep. That's an order."

She believed him and never felt safer. Hermione closed her eyes, knowing nothing could hurt her with Titus around.

---

Two weeks later, Titus brought her to Ollivander's. They went after it closed. Titus looked both ways, making sure no one saw them. The bell jingled when they entered. The old man stacking boxes looked surprised to see them, but he gave a warm smile.



"For your silence." Titus reached out his hand with a bag full of galleons. "I think you understand why it would be bad if any word of this got out."

The old man looked at Titus and pushed back his hand.

"My wands are for any witch or wizard that needs one, and that includes muggleborns."

Titus' jaw clenched, and his hand gripped the bag of galleons harder than he should. There seemed to be a lot said between the two men during the silence. Hermione didn't understand the hard stares, but eventually Titus retracted the bag and placed it back in his pocket.

"Very well, but I should warn you that if this gets discovered, I'm coming to you first, regardless of the source."

Ollivander gave a sharp nod and turned his gaze on Hermione, looking her up and down, as if assessing for something. Eventually, his eyes lit up.

"Ah, yes, I think I know the one."

He led her to the rows and rows of wands and climbed a stool, pulling out several boxes of wands. Hermione wondered how he kept them all straight. Any minute now, and they would all topple over. But the stacks remained intact when Ollivander pulled out a black box. To her, it looked just like the rest, but there must be some way for him to tell them apart.

He climbed down and opened the box to reveal a pretty black wand, straight and smooth. It looked unbendable.

"Grab it," Ollivander encouraged. Hermione did, and it only emitted a few ugly sparks.

"No, no, that's not right." He grabbed the wand and placed it back in its box. He took another moment, and then he gave a grin.

He walked back up and pulled out another, this one in a brown box.

When he opened it, a light brown wand emerged with a raised pattern on the bottom of vines crawling up.

"Ten and three-fourths inches long, made of vine wood, with a dragon heartstring core. A remarkable wand for a remarkable witch."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat before she touched it, knowing it was meant for her. The magic called to her, twisting in her chest. Her fingers reached out, and when she grasped it, her whole body lit up. Every cell in her body stood at attention, vibrating just below her skin. She gave a gentle swish, and the room exploded in a firework of colors, a celebration.

Hermione laughed, watching the sparks of magic rain down around her. In the glow, Titus' face appeared. His pensive expression cut through her joy for a moment, but it didn't last.

She gave another swish of her wand.



## Chapter 8: Periwinkle

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Peter Gundry- "The Vampire Masquerade"

A big thank you to my beta, MyPrivateInsanity. This chapter she especially helped me reorder paragraphs to help the flow of the story!

### Periwinkle

December arrived, and Hermione sat in front of her vanity. Tabitha stood behind her, taming her hair into an intricate updo, braiding it into an impressive rose pattern around her head. A few curls hung loose, despite Tabitha's attempts to subdue it.

"Lovely." Tabitha looked a little teary eyed, and Hermione rolled her eyes. The old woman cried at everything, but Hermione enjoyed her obvious affection.

Hermione grinned, showing her new, improved teeth. She had always been buck-toothed, but a spell had rebounded and knocked them out three weeks before. The healer made sure to regrow them straight and even.

"Whose necklace is this?" She put a hand on the delicate string of diamonds, each one shaped like a rose. It was one of the most beautiful pieces of jewellery she'd ever seen and had to be an heirloom.

"The late Mrs. Nott."

"Wouldn't Titus be angry I'm wearing it?"

"He's the one who suggested it."

She brushed the diamonds with the tips of her fingers, feeling the sharp points, and dropped her hand. For the first time, she looked at herself in the mirror and didn't see a child. Tabitha had allowed her to put on a little makeup, and she wore a dress they custom ordered in France in a lovely periwinkle which glittered under the lights as she moved.

"I'm a little nervous," she admitted.

"Don't be." The old woman stared at her in the mirror warmly. "You're as beautiful as a flower. None of the boys will be able to take their eyes off you."

"That's what I'm afraid of," a deep voice said. She glanced up to find Titus leaning on the doorframe of her room, adjusting his cufflinks. "You do look beautiful, Sprite."

Her cheeks warmed with the compliment.

He wore formal dress robes, looking unfairly handsome. He had shaved his beard and combed his hair into an attractive style. It looked smoother than she'd ever seen it, but it still curled at the nape of his neck. His striking blue eyes stood out in contrast with his dark hair and clothing.

She hadn't seen him much lately. Work kept him busy. When she woke up, he'd already left for the day, and by the time he came home, she was asleep. He promised he'd be here today though - Hogwarts was hosting a Yule Ball as part of the Triwizard Tournament, and some of the muggleborns had been invited. Delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang would be there, and rumour had it that the Quidditch star Viktor Krum was participating. She knew Theo must be losing his mind, since Krum was his favourite.

Hermione couldn't wait to arrive. She'd never been to a ball or to Hogwarts.

"Will I be allowed to dance with other boys besides Theo?"

From his instant frown, it seemed like he wanted to say no.

"Yes, but under supervision. I'm sure Malfoy will be first in line." He held out his hand. "But I require the first dance."

Hermione grabbed his hand, unable to stop a smile as he pulled her up and made her twirl. Her skirt billowed and glittered.

---

They arrived at Hogwarts. Her eyes stayed on the old castle as they rolled closer in the carriage. Ugly horses with wings pulled them, their skin pulled tight over bones. Thestrals, Titus called them. Hermione wondered how they stayed alive when they resembled walking skeletons. When she first saw them, she'd jumped in fright, but Titus' hand on her elbow steadied her.

"I forgot you'd see them."

"How can I?"

"You've seen death."

The thought made her shiver. She made a note in her mind to research the ugly creatures later.

When they finally stopped, Titus helped her out of the carriage, pausing while she straightened her dress.

"It's beautiful," she said, studying the outline of the castle.

Grey stone spires reached to the sky. A giant lake reflected the moonlight, and an endless forest grew in the distance. It looked like a fairy tale. She wondered what it would be like to call this her school. It made her jealous of Theo, despite knowing she should be grateful she had lessons and friends at home.

"I thought you would like it." Titus had a large grin on his face, eyes on Hermione's amazement. He gave her hand a squeeze. "Are you ready for your first ball?"

Hermione nodded, unable to form words in her excitement. Torches lit the way as other people entered the large stone hallways beside them. Behind her, Katie walked next to her mistress. When she noticed Hermione, she gave a giant wave. She wore a dark blue dress with her hair curled into waves on her shoulder. Many of the boys their age kept stealing glances as she passed. Not that Katie noticed. Her friend would rather be in quidditch gear, flying around the pitch, getting dirty. Her mistress must have earned some grey hairs getting Katie in a dress.

The boys weren't allowed to attend, and Julie was nowhere to be seen, but she assumed her mum wouldn't let her come to a dance.

"Holy Merlin and Salazar." Theo walked into her vision. "You look like a girl."

Hermione reached out and pushed his shoulder for the backhanded compliment. For a moment, he resembled his brother, since they wore similar clothes.

"And you look like an idiot."

Theo just blinked a few times, as if she looked like a different person. To be fair, she rarely dressed up. He grabbed Hermione by the elbow.

"Let's go inside the Great Hall," he said. "The seventh years enchanted it to look like an ice palace. You missed the first part. The Triwizard tournament competitors entered with their dates and already had their first dance."

---

Their turn to enter came, and Titus presented their invitation so their arrival could be announced to the room. As Theo had described, fake ice covered the room— an illusion so lifelike it felt cool to the touch. Snowflakes fluttered from the ceiling, landing in their hair, and the ceiling displayed the brilliant colours of an aurora borealis.

Their names were announced, and the entire room stopped dancing as they entered the Great Hall. Even the music halted. Hermione's body heated at the inspection, and she wished she could disappear. Since the incident in Knockturn Alley, she'd stayed at the manor, so being the center of attention of so many people nearly overwhelmed her.

"Why are they all looking at us?"

"They aren't looking at us." Titus leaned down to whisper in her ear. "They're looking at you."

"But why?"

"You're famous," Theo answered.

"I am?"

Theo nodded.

"How you killed Fenrir is a legend, even as far away as Russia. And the way you got away from our kidnappers has been the best gossip of the year. They're curious about you. Not to mention, you're pretty. I'm sure they're all interested in putting in their tokens."

Titus gave a snort at Theo's suggestion. "I'm not accepting any tokens unless you find a boy you like... though he still needs to be qualified according to my standards. I'm willing to consider if he proves impressive enough."

Titus had created a story that she tricked her abductors instead of using magic, and the minister gave her a letter of praise for her courage. No one knew the truth, except Titus, Draco, Lucius, and herself. Even Theo didn't know about her magic, and it was the first secret she'd ever kept from him.

From what her tutor told her, Dumbledore's curse had affected most of mainland Europe and Asia. Other parts of the world were spared. The Americas, Australia, and the entire continent of Africa—along with their muggle populations—banded together into a formidable alliance, locking down their borders and refusing any attempts to trade for their muggleborns.

Hermione attempted to be brave, like a Gryffindor, but she blushed and looked away as they walked through the students. The stares intensified as they went further into the room, from both the boys and the girls, from Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. Even the professors' eyes followed them.

The crowd parted as they glided through a group of older boys in red uniforms, looking severe and handsome. One of them with buzzed dark hair caught her eye. He smiled and nodded his head, and she gave a shy smile in return. In response, two of his friends shook his shoulder in encouragement. The boy looked pleased with her reaction. She felt his stare on her back as they crossed to the edge of the dance floor and joined the other guests observing the dancers.

"Bloody hell," Theo said, sounding breathless. "Did you see the way Viktor Krum looked at you? Oh Merlin, you need to introduce me. What if he puts in a token for you? We could be like brothers!"

Titus just glared at Theo, and then turned that glare on the crowd, as if they were all a threat.

Viktor Krum? Hermione chanced a glance back to the boy in the red uniform. He still stared at her, and her heart accelerated with nerves.

"I don't think it meant anything. He just smiled."

"Just smiled! You're mental, Hermione. He's absolutely terrifying. I haven't seen him smile since he arrived."

After the rest of the guests arrived, the music started back up. Titus offered her his hand, giving a little bow.

"You promised me the first dance."

She placed her hand on top of his softly, and he led her to the center of the dance floor. She'd grown a lot in the past year, so she no longer had to reach as far to put her hand on his shoulder.

"Like we practised, Sprite."

Tabitha and Titus had spent several weekends teaching some of the traditional pureblood dances. She still missed a few steps, but Titus was as good a dancer as he was a dueler. Every time she messed up, he adjusted, using his strength to direct where he wanted her.

As they twirled, she kept looking into the crowd. She hadn't seen Malfoy yet, and it bothered her. He'd sent a letter a few weeks before that contained a single sentence: "I can't wait to see you at the Yule Ball." A secret part of her hoped to see him too. She couldn't get his expression out of her mind when his father had bent down and picked her up— a mix of concern, awe, and confusion. Since that night, his face plagued her, hovering on the edge of her dreams.

It shocked her that she found Draco Malfoy attractive. She had spent much of the day getting ready, thinking what she'd say to him, having imaginary conversations, and now he didn't even bother showing up, contrary to his promise.

"Who are you looking for?" Titus asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"Malfoy?"

She answered with a grimace.

"You don't like him, do you?" He seemed mildly disgusted at the thought.

"No, but...I don't know."

"You still wanted to show him how dressed up you are?"

"I guess." She shrugged.

"Malfoy pops up everywhere he's not wanted. He'll show up soon. No doubt wanting a dance. And if he doesn't show, I won't be disappointed."

Hermione laughed. Titus always knew how to make her smile.

The song ended. Titus made her twirl, and then tugged her back, dipping her low.

"Enjoy your night, Sprite."

---

Theo danced with her next. Unlike his brother, he didn't correct her, so they spent their time stepping on each other's feet and cursing. At one point, he caught her when she almost stumbled.

"You're terrible," he teased

"Shut up. So are you."

"If you want to impress Viktor Krum, you need to improve fast."

"What do you mean?"

Theo pointed to his right where Viktor walked toward them as if on a mission. Hermione's cheeks warmed, and for a moment she wished the floor would swallow her. When he reached them, he gave a deep bow with one arm tucked behind his back. He straightened and turned to Theo, who had dissolved into nervous tics the closer Krum got.

"I would like to ask Herm-own-ninny for a dance."

She briefly considered correcting his pronunciation of her name, but Theo interrupted her, sputtering out something incoherent, star-struck

Viktor turned to her with the same question in his expression.

Hermione searched out Titus—the true decision maker. He stood off to the side, eyes on Viktor, looking a little amused at her anxiety. He nodded, showing he would allow it.

"I'd love to dance," she said. Whatever bravery Theo thought she possessed, it faltered when Viktor reached out his hand, but Hermione managed to grab it in her panic.

As the boy led her further into the dance floor, Theo wiggled his eyebrows at her, and she stuck her tongue out at him. When Viktor turned toward her, he placed a hand on the curve of her waist, in a place not too low or too high. She put a hand on the edge of his shoulder, brushing along his crisp, red uniform, and they kept an acceptable distance between them.

"I'm not a very good dancer," she warned.

He grinned.

"I am not either. Maybe we can pretend." She liked his accent, paired with a surprisingly deep voice.

They stayed that way, swaying a little back and forth, not quite doing the formal moves. The silence began to weigh on her, and when she chanced a glance, Viktor was biting his cheek, eyes on his feet, as if making sure he got the moves right. He seemed just as nervous as her, and it made her feel better.

"How did you know my name?" She finally asked.

He gave a little laugh that rumbled through his chest.



"Everyone knows the muggleborn who killed Greyback. My friends wanted to ask for a dance, but they were too scared of your master."

"And you aren't?"

"Not afraid of the Butcher of Manchester? I would be a fool."

Hermione tripped in shock, but Viktor kept her upright.

*The Butcher of Manchester?*

Hermione blinked several times without speaking. She wanted to ask him what he meant, but he said it as if she should know. To clear her confusion, she shook her head. The thought that *Titus* would be called the "Butcher" of *anything* was absurd. Viktor must be confused with someone else. She ignored the comment completely, because it didn't even make sense.

"I knew your name too," she said after she regained her bearings. "Theo has a poster of you in his room."

She blushed after she said it, afraid she sounded like a rabid fangirl. He seemed pleased by the sentiment though.

"Do you like quidditch?"

On this, she refused to lie.

"Only a little," she admitted, and he gave a frown. "But I like to watch it sometimes... if I know the players."

"Then maybe at the next World Cup, you can cheer for me, since you *know* me."

The *World Cup* was a bit of an exaggeration, since it now only included European and Asian teams.

"Of course."

They descended into a painful silence before Viktor turned his sharp eyes on her.

"There is a rumour you have wandless magic. They say you killed your kidnappers."

She tensed, unready for the question. What he asked was dangerous. Not to mention, she didn't like to think of that day. Her nightmares returned with a vengeance, now with the new character of the filthy wizard sawing off her fingers in revenge.

"I didn't kill any of them." Not a lie. "The Order members were just not very smart, is all." Lie.

Hermione fidgeted, knowing it gave her away. She was a decent liar, but she'd been thrown off guard. If he'd only speculated about the wandless magic before, he knew now. A large, handsome grin crossed his face.

"Do not worry. I will not tell. In Bulgaria, it is a valued skill. They are fools here to deny it."

Hermione blushed, not knowing what to say. He looked at her, studying her expressions.

"I forget how they are here. If a wizard is afraid of a witch's magic, then he does not deserve her."

The music stopped. She was a little relieved it did, pulling away. Viktor gave a bow in her direction.

"I plan to deserve you, Herm-own-ninny."

He twisted and walked stiffly back to his friends, who greeted him with congratulatory tugs on his shoulder and sharp taps on his back.

---

No one else asked her to dance. A little disappointed, she stood next to Theo until she decided to make her way to the refreshment table. When she got there, she barreled into a wizard, causing him to spill his pumpkin juice. There were some awkward, "Sorry are you okays" before Theo's laugh cut through the commotion.

"Harry!" Theo greeted him. "This is my sister, Hermione."

A boy with dark hair and pretty green eyes hidden behind glasses looked up and smiled. It was open and wide— an honest smile. Harry Potter, Theo's friend. Hermione stuck out her hand, and they shook. Theo told her Harry's mum was a muggleborn, and his parents *married* before the curse. Hermione wished she could meet her.

"Hello, Hermione," he said. "Theo talks about you all the time. "

"Only good things, I hope."

"Most of the time." He gave a sideways smile. "He says you're wicked smart, but ruthless and a bit of a swot."

Hermione tried to pinch Theo, but he hopped away before she could.

"You see how violent she is?" Theo stood behind his friend for protection. "I'm practically mistreated."

"Blimey, Harry, this is *that* muggleborn."

Hermione turned toward the noise, not liking the tone, and came face to face with a boy with red hair, blue eyes, and freckles. He said it as if she was some species of rare frog.

Ronald Weasley. She remembered the stories Theo told her about his family and felt both uncomfortable with his family connections and a raw form of pity for the boy before her. He didn't look much like his Dragon Tamer brother, though he was still good-looking. He wore atrocious robes, with ruffles and holes, and they smelled a bit like mothballs.

She almost answered with, *Blimey, this is that Blood Traitor*, but she held her tongue. Instead, she merely glared until the boy shifted on his feet.

"My *name* is *Hermione*," she said, nose a little in the air.

The boy rubbed the back of his neck.

"Ignore him," Harry cut in. "He's barely eaten today, and he turns into a troll when he's hungry." He turned to Hermione, ignoring Ron's incredulous look, and then he paled. "Well, it was nice to meet you, but I think we'll have to say goodbye. Titus looks like he might murder one of us."

Hermione twisted. Harry was right. Titus' stare could melt ice. He must not like her talking to children of blood traitors.

"Sorry about how I greeted you, Hermione," Ron told her. He still rubbed the back of his neck. "I really am a bit hungry."

She nodded her acceptance of the apology as they turned with new drinks and plates of food to walk near a table of other Gryffindors. It felt strange seeing the group of them, as if she should be there with them. Hermione shook her head from the stupid fantasy, trying to be grateful for her school back home.

Still, as she watched the witches and wizards mingle and laugh, a needle lanced her heart, poisoned with jealousy and bitterness.

## Chapter 9: Under the Moonlight

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Frank Walker- "Kiss Me" (ft. Theresa Rex)... The man in the music video gives me Draco vibes.

A big thank you to the brilliant MyPrivateInsanity for editing this chapter!

Just a warning: Please read the tags carefully. Right now, the story seems light, but it will dive into fucked up themes (around chapter 15/16 it will start to get progressively darker). This society is built on slavery and rape. This story WILL make you uncomfortable. It's meant to make you uncomfortable. However, I promise Hermione's eventual rise will be satisfying as fuck.

"Can I show Hermione some of the castle?" Theo had waited to ask the question until Titus stopped his conversation with Headmaster Snape.

"Maybe when I'm done. There are a few professors who I need to speak with before leaving."

"You'll never be done," Theo complained. "What could happen? Hogwarts is one of the safest places to be. I promise to be next to her the whole time. We'll stay inside. I just wanted to show her the library—"

"The library!" Hermione clasped her hands together in excitement.

Titus smirked at her enthusiasm. He always teased her about her love of learning, and how she could get lost in a bookstore. When she gave her best pleading expression, Titus softened. She planned to pull out every manipulation she knew to convince him, because he always found it hard to say no to her.

"Fine," he conceded. "But only the library."

"But I wanted to show her the Astronomy Tower too. Or maybe the dungeons."

Titus shook his head.

"I'll allow the Astronomy tower, but not the dorms."

She'd take what she could get.

"Library first," she demanded. She heard Titus laugh as she grabbed Theo's arm and dragged him out of the room.

---

"Only you would want to look at books when there is a dance going on," Theo said.

Hermione stood in the middle of the Hogwarts library, twirling with her arms outstretched, as if that would help her absorb the knowledge. The librarian, Madam Pince, kept eagle eyes on them, even as they disappeared in the stacks. Hermione knew she was a kindred soul.

"It's wonderful." She gave a deep sniff, sighing when it smelled exactly how she hoped, of old pages and burnt candles and accumulated dust. "Besides, you were the one who first suggested it."

Theo had been fidgeting since they left the Great Hall, suggesting he was keeping something from her. Hermione stopped her library worship and narrowed her eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, if I tell you, you have to promise not to get mad."

Hermione crossed her arms, already not liking where this was leading.

"I will *not* promise that *Theodore*. Just tell me, or I'll get mad regardless."

Theo swallowed.

"I chose dare."

"I'm not following."

"During a game of Wizarding Truth or—"

"Theo!" Hermione's mouth fell open. "You did not play that horrid game. I thought you were smarter than that. There are some real consequences to playing."

Theo sighed and blinked his hazel eyes. The glasses slid to the end of his thin nose, and he gave one push to put them back into position.

"Yes, I know, which is why I need your help. I tried to keep with truth—honest, I did— but the questions started to get embarrassing. So on my last turn I chose dare."

Hermione already began to think, knowing Theo got himself into a bind only she could get him out of.

"Is that why you wanted to get away from the dance and Titus?"

He reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder, looking grave. "Draco dared me to get you up to the Astronomy Tower alone tonight."

"Alone!"

"Salazar, Hermione, I'm sorry. I'm a terrible brother. Just curse me, I deserve it. Titus would flay me alive if he found out."

Hermione tried to be angry, but a new sensation burned under her skin, a little feverish. Draco never intended *not* to see her, he just wanted to see her *alone*. It was wrong and forbidden, and at the moment, there was nothing she wanted more, if only to punch him in the nose for manipulating Theo again.

"What will happen if I refuse to meet him?"

"I'll go blind for a year."

Hermione drew in a sharp breath, attempting to control her anger, but it proved difficult. Theo looked at her with pleading eyes.

"I'll go, but you owe me big time."

Theo grabbed her and kissed both cheeks, drawing her into a deep hug.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you," he said. "You're a beautiful goddess, and I am forever —"

"Yeah, yeah." Hermione shoved him off her. "Just lead the way before Titus decides to leave early, and you can't see for a year."

---

Hermione climbed the creaky steps. She hated heights, part of the reason she hated flying. It always made her feel as if she'd tip into the void, dizzy and nauseous, even if she stood away from the edge. Now the burning pinpricks sprouting across her body eclipsed the vertigo, giving her enough courage to keep going.

The cold wind greeted her first, slicing through the thin material of her dress. Her breath formed tiny clouds in the air.

Draco waited at the top, leaning over the railing. He turned toward her as she entered, and she wished she could capture the surprise on his face.

"You look—"

He didn't finish, eyes trailing up and down. He wore a set of robes so dark that he blended into the night sky behind him. His hair was without gel, reminding her of fine silk, and she found she preferred him this way. His pale hair brushed the tops of his porcelain cheeks, highlighting his crystal eyes— every feature a different shade of colourless. The older he got, the more he looked like his angel-monster father. Hermione didn't know if that repulsed or enticed her, and it swirled inside her into a poison. It made her veins sluggish, her brain foggy.

But not too foggy.

"What am I doing here, Malfoy?" She crossed her arms on her chest.

"After all the risk to get you alone, I'd forgotten you insist on being a brat."

Usually, she'd be offended, but instead she laughed.

"Is that any way to sweet talk me?"

"Oh, you want me to sweet talk you? I honestly thought you'd like some verbal sparring, but I can do that too if you wish."

"Ugh, don't bother with either. I'm only here for Theo." Hermione looked around. "What do you want?"

"To dance, of course."

The music floated all the way up here. It sounded muted, but each note jumped along her skin, and the hairs on her arms stood up.

"You could have done that in the Great Hall."

"Not in the way I want to do it." He looked her up and down again in a way that made her whole body tingle in anticipation. "Also, I don't think Titus likes me very much, and at the moment, it's mutual."

Draco held out his hand for her to take. She stared at it, considering. She'd get in just as much trouble as Draco for this. But she was curious what he planned, and besides Viktor, no one else had asked her to dance.

She didn't know what was going on with her body that made her discard logic. Despite her brain reminding her of all the consequences, Hermione reached out and grabbed his hand. His palm was rough under her soft skin and hot to the touch, such a contrast to the December chill. Draco smirked and tugged her close. She stumbled, but he caught her, placing her against his body.

"Oh," she said, with both hands pressed to his chest. His heart raced beneath her palm, telling her under all the bravado, this scared him too.

Since her mind had decided to stop working for the night, she stood there while Draco repositioned their arms so both of hers wrapped around his neck, while his went around her waist. Viktor had kept a respectable distance while dancing, putting his hands in the proper place, but Draco didn't bother. He touched her lower back near the curve of her bottom and kept their bodies pressed together. There were no fancy twirls, no coordinated movements. Instinct drove the small sways, a feral beat in her blood.

"I don't remember being taught this pureblood dance." Her mouth hovered near his neck. She thought if she concentrated enough, she could see his veins.

"I made my own." One of his hands traced up her spine. The hot touch dragged across her clothes, and an involuntary gasp pulled from her chest.

"This is against the rules."

"Rules are for commoners." His lips dipped down to her ear. "They don't apply to me. I get what I want, and no one tells me what to do."

She believed him. He wanted to dance with her alone, and he somehow managed that, right under Titus' nose, a feat no one else would dare. Something about the boy was dangerously intelligent, obsessive, and entitled. She shouldn't encourage his advances, but this felt like a challenge.

"What do you want then?"

"To kiss you."

Hermione tried to pull back, a little wary. Her heart jumped to her throat, afraid he could see through her. After seeing pictures of people kissing, she'd wanted to try it with Titus - but many nights since that day in Knockturn Alley, she'd thought of Draco instead.

"I've never—"

"I haven't either," he admitted with a shrug. "You'd be my first too. But it's the perfect place and time, don't you think? Dancing under the moonlight, music playing."

That sounded suspicious. It was the exact fantasy she had for her first kiss, and she'd only told one person.

"You got this from Theo, didn't you?"

"You're quick. It's why I like you so much. I know I'll never be bored."

"That wanker," she cursed, much to Draco's amusement. "When I get my hands on that skinny little worm—"

Draco gave a deep laugh, looking happier than she'd ever seen him. It was an odd, eerie sight, she decided.

"I quite like it when I'm not the target of your anger. It does things to me."

"Keep talking, and I'm sure I will be angry with you again."

"That does things to me too." He pressed her back into place, curving her body against his. "Don't be so hard on Theo. I did plan it out, and Theo picked truth just one too many times. And then he had the nerve to choose dare against me, and I couldn't waste the opportunity."

True. In the end, Theo was a hapless pawn in Draco's complicated game of chess. Remembering Lucius' talk with Titus, she knew Draco had learned to play from the best.

"So what do you think?" he asked, staring at her. She found she couldn't quite meet it.

"About what?"

"About having our first kiss."



Her skin felt hot, but she was desperately curious. She'd been curious about kissing for years. Her eyes flicked up, and she thought that might have been a mistake because she felt lost in the grey.

"I don't really know you."

"Unfortunately, we aren't given the time to fix that. If I could, I'd properly court you, but I can only send you a few letters a year, which I'm sure Titus monitors. So if we don't kiss now, we'll have to wait until after I win you at the Trials, and that's years away."

"You could kiss other girls besides me."

He gave a snort of a laugh.

"Which girls? Pansy is like a sister, Daphne is unbearably dumb, and the others don't even count." His hands briefly tightened against her dress. "I don't want anyone but you. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since seeing you fight that wizard." He paused, and she watched as his throat moved as he swallowed. "Besides, I doubt *you'd* have another chance to kiss a bloke, unless you want to kiss Theo."

"Gross." She shook her head to get the image out. She glared at him. "You bully Theo. Why should I even talk to you?"

"I haven't bullied him since first year."

Her glare intensified.

"Fine, I make fun of him a little, but he makes it too easy. It's not serious anymore. I understand he's your brother." Malfoy stopped, as if to read her expression. "Any other questions? Because you don't have much time to decide."

He made a valid point. When would she get another opportunity to get a first kiss? Draco offered something she'd been desperately curious about, and she did find him attractive. Not to mention, he gave her Hopper. He couldn't be that bad if he'd saved him for all those years, mending and cleaning him.

"If we do this, it's just an experiment. It doesn't mean I have *any* feelings for you."

"Sure," he said with a wicked smile, as if he thought differently.

The idea of kissing intrigued her, but the reality made her nerves tingle.

"To be extra clear, I *don't* like you."

"Lots of people kiss without liking each other."

She wasn't sure if that was true or not.

"What if we're terrible at it?" She asked.

"How would either of us know?"

"What if someone finds out?"

"Are you going to overanalyse everything?"

"Probably."

He shook his head, looking a little amused.

"Stop. Thinking."

He leaned down slowly, eyes on her lips. She should stop him, slap him, but she reached up to let their lips connect. He softly pressed against her, making a little noise, like a sigh. She gasped against his mouth, and then her whole body melted into him. His hands left her waist and cradled either side of her head.

And then his tongue slid across her lips, making her jerk back in surprise.

"What are you doing?"

"Kissing you properly." He kept her cheeks cradled in his hands, fingers messing up her elaborate rose braids. "Just trust me. We're experimenting, remember?"

Trust him? She couldn't trust him, but again her curiosity ruled her. Did people use their tongue? If so, did it feel good?

"Okay," she whispered.

He lowered his head. When his tongue touched her lips again, she opened, allowing him inside. The taste and warmth of him scorched across her body, zipping up and down. Hermione's fingers curled into his outer robes, wrinkling the expensive material in her grasp.

She wasn't sure how long they stood in each other's embrace, fingers entwined in each other's clothes and hair, tongues brushing against each other. Draco broke free of it and kissed down her cheek, letting his lips touch just under her ear. Her whole body jolted in pure pleasure.

"You like that?" Draco whispered low against her skin.

She almost answered him, but Theo's voice carried up.

"Hermione... Malfoy," he sounded stressed. "My brother will be looking for us soon."

Draco groaned, but he pulled back. He tucked a loose curl behind her ear.

"Did that match your fantasy?"

"Almost." She didn't want him to think too highly of himself.

"Practice will fix that. You seem like a perfectionist. Soon enough, we'll be expert snoggers."

Hermione laughed at his audacity to ever think he'd be able to do this again, unless he won at the Trials. She managed to extricate herself from his arms, though everything inside her wanted to leap back toward him. Draco rubbed his thumb against his bottom lip.

"Perhaps," she said. "Though I have high standards. I expect you to keep meeting them."

She made her way to the stairs.

"Of course."

"And stop bullying people, or I'm going to start bullying you!"

"Careful, I might like that." He gave a handsome grin. "Bye, Granger. I'll find a way for us to practise snogging again."

She jolted on the spot. The unfamiliar name stabbed her soul, pinning her feet to the ground.

"Granger? What's that?"

"It's your last name. Your real one. Don't you remember?"

In a distant dream. She cradled the knowledge in her heart, a precious thing. The beat of the word conjured her father's face, the way he smiled, something she feared she'd forgotten forever. Her chest ached, but in a good way. She blinked a few times.

"Why did you call me that? I have a name."

"A weird one, and everyone else uses it. You hear it all day, so it's become nothing. I needed something that would be only mine."

The word was as dangerous as he was. Muggleborns shed all their muggle connections, including their last names. She'd forgotten it without its use. She liked it. The way he said it, low and slow, sent the word as a caress along all the places his lips touched.

She smiled, showing she accepted the nickname and nearly danced down the stairs, unable to contain her excitement, the thrill of doing something forbidden.

When Theo saw her, his eyes widened. He shook his head when she stepped beside him.

"Oh no, what did you two do?"

"We kissed."

"I'm going to die," he groaned. "Titus will gut Draco, me, and you. Probably in that order. Or, really, he'll just yell at you, but you'll be attending my funeral shortly."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Titus will never know."

He managed to look ashamed.

"He will if you walk in with that stupid smile. Your lipstick is smeared, and your hair is out of place. Here, let me fix it."

---

Theo fixed her appearance, and by the time they arrived back at the Great Hall, she'd also gotten her expression under control.

Titus waited by the punch bowl. A young female professor stood next to him. She giggled while looking up at him, and Hermione didn't like it.

Titus had women over sometimes, bringing them straight to his bedroom. Hermione suspected they had sex. Even though she didn't quite know the logistics of the act, she knew it involved nakedness and nighttime. A few times Titus forgot to silence the room, and she heard the low groans from across the hall. At first, she thought the women were in pain, but it sounded too... enthusiastic. They begged him for things that made her blush even without understanding. The women never came to breakfast, and he rarely had the same woman over twice. She should be used to seeing the flirting and the fluttering eyelashes, but the sight always left her with a twisted feeling in her stomach.

Getting her errant emotions under control, Hermione approached Titus. He looked up and gave her a wink. Noticing his shift in attention, the young professor turned and noticed who he acknowledged.

"She's so cute," the woman said, and Hermione bristled. There were many things she wanted to be, and cute wasn't one of them.

"Hello, Professor James," Theo stepped in, recognizing Hermione's annoyed expression.

"Hello, Theo, I hope you enjoyed the dance."

"I did."

The woman nodded at both of them, telling Titus goodbye with a hopeful glance a person would have to be an idiot not to interpret. He gave a nod of his head as she walked away.

"How was the library, Sprite?"

"I think I conjured it from a dream."

He gave a little laugh.

"Maybe I'll bring you back someday," Titus pushed on his brother's shoulder. "When Theo makes the quidditch team, perhaps."

"Hey," Theo protested. "I tried out. I should have at least beaten Pucey, but Draco's an arse still and convinced the captain not to choose me."

Hermione wanted to blame Draco, but she couldn't. Despite Theo loving the game, despite having an entire pitch built for him, he wasn't very good. Just not very naturally athletic. It was a wonder he and Titus were related.

"What did you think of the astronomy tower?" Titus asked.

She almost startled but kept it under control.

"It was—" she searched for the correct word. "*Educational*."

Theo paled and looked close to murdering her.

Titus straightened when he looked to the side. Hermione followed his eyesight and was surprised to see Viktor Krum walking toward them. When he arrived, he bowed low. Hermione found his formality endearing. When he stood back up, he faced Titus.

"Viktor Krum," he said, holding out his hand for Titus to shake.

Titus looked amused, but he shook the extended hand.

"Yes, I know. And I'm sure you know my name too."

"I do."

"And I'm Theo Nott," her brother squeaked out, jumping in front of Titus with his hand out.

Titus gave a snort and shook his head. Viktor grabbed Theo's hand, and her brother appeared like he might faint with joy.

"If you vill allow me, I would like to offer my token for Herm-own-ninny."

Titus' eyebrows rose, but he didn't look surprised.

"And why should I consider you?"

"I am the contender for Durmstrang in the Trivizard tournament. My lineage reaches back to the Dark Ages, and I am the seeker for the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team. I am capable of taking care of her at the same level you do and would honour her in my home."

"Impressive enough." Titus looked at Hermione. "What do you think?"

Hermione blushed, grateful Titus gave a choice in the matter. Most masters didn't. There needed to be three tokens, so she had to choose *somebody*, and she enjoyed their interactions so far. Behind his eyes, there was a simple kindness. He was a much better option than many of the boys, though maybe not as handsome or interesting as Draco.

"Yes."

Titus looked serious, but he nodded.

"Alright," he said. "I'll accept your token. I must warn you the competition will be fierce. The young Malfoy also has a token entered, but I'm sure the others will be on calibre with you once I accept."

"I look forward to the challenge."

Viktor reached in his pocket and took out a round, flat disk about twice the size of a galleon with his family crest stamped on it. When Titus reached forward and took it, sparks of magic erupted.

Before Viktor could pull away, Titus tugged him back, nose to nose.

"If you lied to me, or if your honour is called into question, I will give back the token and not in a kind way. Do you understand?"

Viktor nodded, for once letting a fraction of fear peek through, looking almost relieved when Titus stepped back and pocketed the token. Then the boy turned his attention to Hermione.

"Goodbye, Herm-own-ninny."

"Goodbye," she said back.

When he walked away, Theo placed a hand on her shoulder.

"If he wins, you better give me front row tickets at some point."

Titus rolled his eyes along with Hermione.

"Let's get you home, Sprite." He paused, as if something occurred to him. "Malfoy didn't show."

"I thought you said you wouldn't mind if he didn't."

"That's true. It's just out of character."

"Maybe he was ill."

Titus crinkled his eyes in deep thought.

"Possibly, but not likely." His eyes snapped up, studying Hermione carefully. "Did you see him?"

Titus was very good at detecting lies. It was his career.

"I'm pretty sure I saw him somewhere tonight. He probably just didn't want to dance in front of everyone in the Great Hall, or maybe he thought you wouldn't say yes to dancing with me."

Not a lie, which was the best lie. She'd perfected the technique with Titus.

Titus scoffed, eyes picking her apart, but he continued walking, dropping the conversation.

Hermione wasn't sure if he believed her or not.

# Chapter 10: A Proper Stance

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Jome- "Cinnamon"

A/N: I threw in a Prince of Egypt Easter Egg. Tell me if you find it.

Thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for taking my trash first draft and turning it into a treasure!

### A Proper Stance

Early in March, a ferocious Eurasian eagle owl delivered a giant scroll. It harassed the elves until Tabitha gave it two raw chicken legs before flying away. Titus intercepted the scroll, and after a few days, he handed it over with a grimace, as if the very act cut something inside him. Hermione attempted to control her excitement, but as she got close to her room, she broke into a run, catapulted onto her bed, and then unrolled the scroll from Draco.

**I have a list of questions for you to answer. Beside them, I've listed my preferences. I think this is the best way to get to know one another.**

**1. How do you prefer your tea? I only like hot cocoa. I drink it every night, even in the summer.**

**2.Favourite colour? Regrettably, mine is red. I know— it's embarrassing. I refuse to wear it in case someone mistakes me for one of those moronic imbeciles that wear the colour proudly (Potter). Your brother needs to reevaluate his friendships.**

**3.Do you have any pets? We have a whole stable of horses. My favourite is a black stallion named Anubis. In France, my father has a Pegasus—though he hasn't let me ride it yet. We also have peacocks, but I hate the little shites. Especially Alfred. I'd recommend not trying to pet him, because he has a taste for blood. After trying to maul me, I promised to cook him into a stew, but father forbade me from murdering the bird. I'm not sure why. He doesn't contribute anything to the manor.**

**4...**

The letter went on for thirty-six inches of questions. When Titus asked what she thought of the letter, she shrugged, attempting to prove she didn't care about it, but she kept it hidden under her pillow. At night, she'd pull it out to run her fingers along the ink. Titus said he'd let her respond after a few months. As he put it, "We'll keep him in suspense."

---

Close to summer, Hemione was sitting by the pond with Katie and Julie after their lessons, when she noticed Dean and Finch had been missing for an hour.

"Do you think they went inside for a snack?" Despite constantly eating, Finch remained skeletal.

"I don't know." Katie leaned back on a blanket they brought outside, closing her eyes in the sunshine. "I'm staying here though. I've missed the sun."

"Me too," Julie said.

Hermione got up without them. She searched the grounds and the manor without luck. The treehouse was the last place she looked. When she went up the bucket rope, peeking over the edge, she almost let out a gasp.

Dean pressed tight against Finch on the couch, mouth attached in a deep kiss. Both of them had removed their shirts, and Dean had a hand down the front of Finch's trousers.

Finch moaned, and Hermione gave a squeak of surprise. At the noise, the two boys scrambled apart, wide-eyed, while Finch adjusted his trousers. Before he tugged on his shirt, she saw twisting scars down Finch's back— tangles of mutilated skin. Some of them looked like burn marks.

"Oh Merlin!" Hermione wished to melt into the ground. "I— I'm sorry. I'll just—"

She made to leave, cheeks red and hot with embarrassment, but Dean stopped her.

"Wait, Hermione," he said. "Let me explain."

"It's okay."

"No, please, come in and sit down."

Hermione climbed inside and awkwardly made her way to the far side of the treehouse, sitting in one of the smaller chairs. All three of them looked like they might die from the tension. Finally, Hermione decided to speak.

"So... how long have you two—" she motioned to them.

Dean grabbed the end of the couch in a tight hold as he answered.

"Just for a few months."



"I won't tell anyone, if that's what you're worried about," Hermione said. "I promise— well, unless you want me to."

Finch sighed with relief.

"We plan on telling Katie and Julie one day, but this is new."

"I didn't know two boys could... kiss." They'd been doing much more than that, but she wanted to minimise the embarrassment.

"It's not something we planned. It just happened," Finch said. "Two girls can be together as well. At least, I assume they can."

The three of them blushed at the same time.

"Titus knows," Dean said.

Hermione's eyes widened. If Titus discovered she'd kissed Draco, "angry" would be a tame word to describe his reaction.

"Is he okay with it?"

"I guess so," Dean said. "Titus told us we'd have to stop coming to the lessons. He said we were getting old enough that we might have... urges. So I just blurted out on accident that I only liked Finch. He made us take Veritaserum to make sure we weren't lying about our feelings for each other. I thought we'd get in trouble, but he just said we could come back the next day."

As he spoke, Hermione realised something.

"But what about when you have to be with Pansy and Daphne?"

The Greengrass and Parkinson families already gave their masters a down payment, Finch for Daphne and Dean for Pansy. Women didn't have to participate in the Trials like the men. It was treated as a transaction, bought and sold, used as a last resort for families with no male heirs.

It felt wrong—even more wrong than the Trials—but she couldn't verbalise why. It just rested heavily inside her stomach, a new weight she didn't know how to dislodge.

Harry's parents had been married before the Trials began. She'd always assumed his mum, even as a muggleborn, had somehow been given to Mr. Potter in an arranged marriage according to Pureblood tradition, but after discussing it with Theo, she learned that Lily had chosen Mr. Potter.

She *chose* him.

The very idea rocked something in Hermione's head. *A choice*. The thought bothered her so much that one day she braved asking Titus why she couldn't just choose her wizard - why

bother going through the Trials? He'd said it was the law, and just the way things were, though he seemed uncomfortable with the topic.

A part of her agreed with him: she generally liked to follow rules. But the other part, the secret part inside her, stewed in bitterness. She felt like something had been stolen out from under her nose without her knowing, and she'd just now noticed the loss. But Hermione didn't quite know what had been stolen in the first place.

Dean grimaced at her question.

"We'll have to do our duty somehow, but I'm not looking forward to it."

Hermione nodded, but her heart filled with worry for her friends.

"I guess it won't matter if you two are together now since there's no worry of babies."

Again, she blushed at the thought, wishing she'd just kept her mouth shut.

"Yeah," they both answered.

Earlier in the year, Katie had told her the true process of sex. A man put his penis inside a woman and moved until something came out. From that, a baby was made. It made sense, but she still wished to have a book to study the process more.

If the boys couldn't manage to give the purebloods an heir, especially a male heir, they'd probably be sent to the muggleborn camps outside Knockturn Alley, and then they'd only be able to get menial jobs.

"I'm glad you found each other before—" Hermione didn't want to finish. Both the boys stared at the ground. "Anyway, if you want time together in the future, just give me a wink, and I'll cover for you."

Dean beamed. He looked incredibly relieved.

"Thanks, Hermione."

Hermione grit her teeth, gearing up for the last question, not sure if she wanted the answer.

"Finch?"

"Yeah?"

"What caused those scars on your back?"

Dean and Finch glanced at each other. Obviously, they'd already discussed it.

"Vincent doesn't like me much," Finch said carefully.

Her heart stopped in her chest.

"Vincent did that to you?" Her shock turned to anger. "Have you told anyone? I could get Titus to—"

"No, Hermione, stop," Dean said. "They won't do anything."

"What do you mean they won't do anything? He's being hurt and—"

"I'm saying there's no legal way to help him. Titus couldn't do anything, even if you begged him, and it might make it worse. As long as—" Dean sucked in a breath. "As long as his ability to produce children isn't harmed, or he isn't injured seriously, they can hurt him as much as they want to."

Hermione's stomach clenched. She reached out blindly, grasping at the small table beside her for stability. Her anger coursed through her. Her eyes burned with unshed tears. She knew how Titus treated her was unusual among the purebloods, but she always thought physical abuse was off-limits. Katie had a decent relationship with her masters — at least, they never hit her. Dean's master allowed him some liberties, like flying and attending the school. And Bellatrix would fillet someone and eat them for dinner if they ever hurt Julie.

All this time, Finch had never told her of his pain. He'd made references about Vincent being cruel, but he'd gloss over it.

"I'm sorry," Hermione managed to say. The words felt stale in her mouth, but she didn't know what else to do.

They spent the rest of the time that day in mutual silence, thinking of the inevitable future.

---

Theo had almost failed Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts, so Hermione spent most of the summer sitting over a simmering cauldron with him as he bemoaned his punishment of continued summer lessons.

"You're slicing it in thirds, when it's supposed to be in fourths," Hermione reminded.

Theo ignored her.

"Well, don't get mad at me when you turn purple after testing it," Hermione said. "Titus will just make you do it again."

Theo pointed his knife at her, sweat beading on his forehead.

"You don't have to be here, you know. Go bother Bitty or something."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"But it's fun bothering *you*." She hopped up on the table next to him, swinging her legs. She picked up the potions book and read through a few pages. The tutors assigned to their muggleborn school didn't teach advanced spells or transfiguration, but they did teach basic charms and potions, along with ancient runes, care of magical creatures, and arithmancy. The tutors gave them a ministry-approved generic wand after Christmas break, and Hermione had

to pretend to struggle along with the others. In private, she practised the more advanced curriculum Titus gave her. It frustrated her, because ever since he'd gotten her a wand, he restricted her access to some of the library books with information on dark spells, advanced theories, and wandless magic. When she reached for those books, her hand went straight through, leaving her with limited options for education.

Her wandless magic stagnated, much like Lucius predicted, though she didn't understand why. She could still perform the spells on her curriculum without a wand, but they weren't as powerful. A magical theory could probably explain it, but she now had no way to solve the mystery. She needed more than what she was allowed. The thirst slicked down her throat into her belly, turning into a ravenous hunger.

Hermione stared at Theo as he began slicing the newt tail in fourths, and an idea came to her. Titus would get angry if he found out, but she needed a training partner for duelling, and she trusted no one else to keep the secret. Theo could also benefit from the practice. They could help each other.

"Theo, when you finish, let's do something different." She grinned at him. "Though you have to promise not to tell anyone, especially Titus."

Theo looked up and pointed the knife in her direction again.

"That's what you always say right before we get into massive trouble."

"Do you want to know my plan or not?"

He gave a deep sigh.

"Fine." He pushed up his glasses. "Just give me a minute before I do the thing you want me to do that I know I'll regret."

"Perfect." She jumped off the table. "Meet me in the duelling room."

"Duelling room!" Theo yelled out, but she was already walking out. "Wait, come back Hermione. What are we doing in the duelling room?"

---

Theo stood across from her with a scowl on his face. She held her wand—her real wand—out for him to see.

"I can't believe you never told me."

For once, Hermione felt ashamed. She'd hated keeping it a secret.

"I was sworn to secrecy," Hermione said.

"As if that has ever stopped you before."

"I was going to tell you eventually, but I didn't want to write about it in a letter, and the only time I saw you in person was the Yule Ball, Christmas, and Easter. There was too much going

on."

Theo's hazel eyes narrowed on her in thought.

"Show me."

She did a simple *lumos* just to prove she could. And then she did more complicated spells, the last transfiguring a stick into a wooden snake that slithered along the floor—something she'd learned from a few pages of old class notes she'd stolen from Theo.

"Well, now you're just showing off."

They grinned at each other, and then he frowned.

"The official story with the kidnapping isn't true, is it?"

"I used my magic," she admitted. "I didn't win, though. He would have killed me if it wasn't for Lucius."

Theo seemed to be thinking.

"I guess that explains why Titus accepted Draco's token. That always confused me. I figured Lucius had something over him. Only a Malfoy would dare to blackmail Titus that way."

"It worked."

"For now," Theo warned. "Titus doesn't want Draco to win you, even if you like him. So I wouldn't get *intimate* with the idea of Draco as your wizard. Titus will find a way for him to lose." Theo levelled her with a look that looked both worried and accusing.

"You want me with Viktor anyway."

"True." He grinned. "Though I don't want you to move to Bulgaria. Maybe we can convince their government to allow a special portkey for us."

The thought of the future brought about a sharp discomfort. It always seemed so far away, but she turned sixteen in September. In two years, Titus could decide to start the Trials. Her nightmares became a different sort of panic: four walls closing in, squeezing tighter and tighter until nothing remained of her soul.

Hermione outstretched her wand toward Theo.

"Do you want to practise duelling or not? Based on your marks, you need a lot of help."

"You're rather cheeky for a beginner."

"We'll see." She smiled and flung her first curse, and Theo blocked it.

Later, her chest felt both tight and lighter, as if she'd had a good workout, muscles sore. Her magic flexed inside her, grateful to finally be challenged.

---

**Malfoy,**

**1. I prefer pumpkin juice to tea. Sometimes I like coffee, but only without sugar or milk. According to Theo, that makes me a psychopath, though that's up for interpretation. Drinking hot cocoa during the summer might qualify you as a psychopath as well. It's something to think about.**

**2. My favourite colour is black. It has a bad reputation for no reason, always associated with death, but it's the colour of outer space and onyx and ink—some of my favourite things. Also, red is a great colour. You shouldn't be ashamed of it. But I may be biased because I'm one hundred percent a Gryffindor.**

**3. I don't have any pets. Titus doesn't want another living thing to worry about. I've attempted to catch a gnome to stay in my treehouse, but they're quick when they want to be. I also have a collection of bugs from my friend Finch, but I've never liked them like he does. Maybe one day I can convince Titus to get me a cat.**

**4...**

She wrote thirty-two inches on the scroll before sending it to Titus to approve. She hoped Malfoy briefly choked on his hot cocoa when he discovered she was a Gryffindor.

---

Hermione spent the rest of the summer practising with Theo. She never went without her wand in the duelling room, but at night, she practised without it, moving objects with intention, attempting to strengthen her wandless magic. She'd end in a sweaty mess from the simplest task. After several months of obsessive practice, she managed to do most of the spells on the curriculum without her wand, but she still wasn't at the level she wanted to be.

When Theo left back to Hogwarts for his fifth year, Hermione almost lived in the duelling room after school. A dummy that absorbed spells was her opponent. She'd take her position, bow low, and then go through her litany of spells until she tired.

One day— after sending a strong Incarcerous—Hermione heard clapping. She looked up to find Titus resting against the doorway to the room with a sly smile.

"I see you finally told Theo." He walked forward, and Hermione lowered her wand. "It took much longer than I thought it would."

"How did you find out?"

"Those spells are not on the approved curriculum."

She tensed, unsure if she'd get in trouble or not.

"How long have you known?"

"Most of the summer," he admitted. "If I was opposed to it, the duelling sessions would have stopped in June." He reached in his pocket and took out his own wand. It had a slight curve to

the side and a gnarled center. Titus was ambidextrous with his spell casting, able to fling curses in unexpected ways, and his reflexes remained unmatched among his peers. "Theo doesn't know any spells I'd disapprove of you learning." He stood next to her. "But your stance needs work."

"Oh," Hermione said, surprised. He usually avoided any conversation pertaining to spells, magic, or duelling. Out of sight, out of mind. He always stared at her wand with a pensive expression, as if it might turn into an animal and bite him.

"Flex your knees, like this." He bent his knees, and she attempted to copy him. "Looser, not so tight. Shift your weight as you cast. Try not to always step forward on the same side you cast. It makes you predictable."

She tried until she got the bend in her knees correct and the shift and slight twist of the pelvis to make the aim truer when flinging a curse. He then attempted to show her how to curve the trajectory of a spell. That took more work, but after an hour she managed to do it once, though her aim left much to be desired.

Completely exhausted, she wiped the sweat off her brow with the edge of her sleeve. Even though Titus cast just as much as she did, he didn't even look winded. He rarely missed—a perfect shot each time. She could see how he'd be a formidable opponent.

"Thanks for helping me," she said.

"I couldn't have you copying Theo's terrible stance. We have the Nott image to uphold." He stopped, suddenly serious. "Tell me the truth, and I won't stop the duelling practice— what's your motivation?"

Hermione tried to formulate her thoughts, unsure herself. She didn't know where the obsessive desire for knowledge and magic stemmed from.

"I don't want to be caught off guard again," she said. "If the Order—or anyone else—tries to take me, I'd like to kill them myself."

Titus still wore a serious frown, but he sighed, as if giving up.

"I'll give you a more advanced curriculum soon. I can tell you're bored with the previous one. To be honest, you probably already knew it all before I gave you the list. By this point, you could probably do most of those beginner spells wandless."

"Almost all," she admitted.

He shook his head in amusement, but she caught a moment of hesitancy. Hermione wondered what he was worried about. She'd never use the spells against him. Why keep her magic subdued?

A question had been gnawing at her for months. She'd at first tried to dismiss it, but it tumbled out of her.

"If I asked you a question, would you tell me the truth?"

"If I'm able to. What's bothering you?"

"When I was in Knockturn Alley, I saw... I saw the older muggleborns. Why do they live like that—dirty and without food?"

He searched her expression, as if digging for clues.

"They refuse to work, Sprite," he said carefully. "We've offered them jobs, but they will not take them. They prefer to live that way." His hand clenched. "Everyone must contribute in some way to society if they can. Don't you agree?"

Hermione hesitated.

"Yes, but—"

"I can't change their circumstance. This world is full of problems, and I can't solve them all." He stepped closer to her. "There are plenty of muggleborns who are happy, working at various businesses or pureblood estates. The group you encountered has eschewed help from authorities. I won't allow you to end up like that, if that's what you're concerned about. If the man that wins you in the Trials doesn't treat you in the way that you deserve, I will march into his home and steal you back. Do you understand? You don't need to worry."

Something unravelled in her, as if he'd pulled a string she didn't realise she carried coiled in her heart. She allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Can I ask you another question?"

"Only one more," he teased.

"When Viktor danced with me, he said—well, he called you the Butcher of Manchester."

Titus' shoulders stiffened.

"Did he now?"

Hermione refused to fidget under his hard stare like she wished. Instead, she straightened.

"Why would he call you that?"

Titus didn't answer right away. His jaw clenched, and he glanced out the window.

"It's what the muggles call me," he confessed in a quiet voice. "Several foreign countries use the title as well, including the Americans."

Hermione's stomach dropped. Her mouth went dry.

*The Butcher.*

"But you—"

"It's not an exaggeration."



Hermione paused, not expecting that. She blinked a few times in dismay.

"What do you mean?" Her voice sounded small in her throat.

"Don't act surprised I've killed people, Sprite. You've always known my work requires me to arrest Order members. It's dangerous work, and sometimes it requires me to take a life."

She did know that, but she always thought it resembled justice. The name "Butcher" suggested cruelty, something she found hard to see in him.

He sighed heavily, noticing her troubled expression.

"Two months after the Order attempted to kidnap you, I managed to find their base in Manchester." His eyes became unfocused, as if reliving the memory. "I caught fifty-two rebels—the largest amount found in years."

Hermione kept her whole body still as Titus paused, not wanting him to stop. He didn't always answer her questions like this.

"What happened?"

"In previous years, I might have executed the leaders and sent the rest to labour camps, but they needed to be taught a lesson." He pocketed his gnarled, curved wand. "I executed them publicly, and then butchered them into pieces, hanging their remains along the main streets of the city. As a warning to the Order, I let the corpses rot for days, and if anyone was caught gathering the pieces, they were punished." He walked forward and grabbed her stiff shoulders, knowing this unsettled her. He leaned down so they were on the same level. "They now know the consequences for trying to take you from me. If they do it again, I'll butcher a hundred, and I refuse to feel sorry for that."

She didn't know if that comforted or disturbed her. Were the Order members criminals, deserving of their fate? Or were they victims? The questions swirled in her mind without answers. He gave one more squeeze to her shoulders and then let her go, walking toward the door. A teasing grin tilted the edge of his lips up.

"Keep working on your duelling stance, Sprite. It's only slightly better than Theo's."

Titus Nott by [Ivmaruva](#)



# Chapter 11: The Coven of the Tree

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Raury- "God's Whisper"

Thank you to by Beta, MyPrivateInsanity, for helping with this chapter, despite her having a rough week. Forever grateful!

### The Coven of the Tree

After Christmas break, Hermione entered her classroom in the manor to find a stranger sitting behind the professor's desk. His robes were old-fashioned, with the traditional hat and a dark blond beard that reached his stomach.

"Hello," he said, letting his reading glasses dip down his nose as he peered over them at her. It was an odd look, she thought, as if she was someone he hadn't seen in a long time. Slowly, he closed his book and stood up. "My name is Gideon Booth. I'll be your new professor."

"What happened to Professor Crawford?" Her most recent tutor was so old he barely knew what was going on around him. They often had to remind him to stay on task, as he tended to veer off into stories, staring at the wall, forgetting where he was.

"Retirement, if you can believe it."

A joke. Hermione smiled, already liking the man.

The studies that day focused on Care of Magical Creatures. He brought out a Puffskein, much to the delight of Julie, who squealed when she saw it. And then a Bowtruckle, a magical insect resembling a branch on a tree. Finch nearly fainted in excitement.

Later in the day, as she worked on her essay, the back of her neck prickled as if she was being watched, but each time she glanced up, her professor's eyes were trained on the chalkboard. She brushed off the feeling, sure she was imagining things.

But then, after class, Professor Booth stopped her on the way to the treehouse. Her friends had already gone out the door.

"A moment, Miss Hermione."

A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face, and he adjusted his robes. Nott manor struggled with ventilation, even with charms, but it wasn't hot enough to produce that reaction.

"I've come to understand that you know most of what I'm teaching, so I've prepared a separate lesson to challenge you. The content has already been approved by your master, of course." Professor Booth brought out two heavy books from his satchel and placed them on his desk. Achievements in Charming and A Comprehensive History of Ancient Britannia. She placed her fingers on one of the titles.

"I'm afraid I've read these already."

"Is that so? Well, regardless, I'd like you to read the first chapter of each tonight."

"I don't—"

"I insist."

A little annoyed, Hermione picked up the books and clutched them to her chest. The professor relaxed into his chair and gave her the same odd stare as she walked out.

---

Later that night, Hermione sat in her bed. She didn't want to read the same information twice, but he'd been insistent, so she picked up the book on charms and opened it.

It wasn't about charms.

Hermione flipped through the pages, finding numbers and formulas. It resembled arithmancy, but it used symbols she'd never seen before. Of course, she already knew addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, but this... she'd never seen anything like it.

All at once, Hermione understood— muggle mathematics.

Instinct made her slam the illegal book shut in panic, but curiosity caused her to pick up the second book.

Instead of numbers, it showcased odd pictures. She didn't stop long enough to read the descriptions.

Dean had been nine when he'd been found. For the two years prior, he had attended an illegal muggle school, where they learned about things called cells and atoms and germs. He'd tried to explain it once. From what little she knew, the magical world studied some of the same things as muggles, especially for spell creation, advanced transfiguration, and healing. But they were considered specialised studies and not something approved for muggleborns.

Maybe if she learned muggle mathematics and science, she could study higher forms of magic when the opportunity arose.

The thought sent a buzzing excitement through her.

She flipped the book shut, heart pounding.

But why did Professor Booth sneak her a muggle mathematics and science book?

Whatever the reason, Titus certainly had *not* approved the content of this lesson. He hated anything muggle, especially their gadgets. He blamed his parents' deaths on them. Somehow, the professor snuck the books inside the manor right under his nose. If Hermione were a more obedient person, she'd tell Titus about the book.

Booth could be like Ollivander—a wizard she suspected didn't believe muggleborns should be denied knowledge or magic—but he also might be a member of the Order, attempting to earn her trust just to snatch her away.

Hermione chewed on her lip in indecision. The thought of giving up new knowledge made her shudder. She'd rather chop off a limb.

For whatever reason, Professor Booth decided to risk Azkaban to give her forbidden knowledge.

What could it hurt to read them? Why did it matter whether she learned about muggle things? It's not as if she'd ever use it.

And maybe he'd give her more books...

It made her uneasy and wary of her new professor, but with a nod of her head, she made her decision. She cracked open the science book again and began to read.

---

Professor Booth had been standing in front of the chalkboard, engrossed in writing, when she entered the classroom.

When he noticed her, his chalk stopped with a small screech. A muscle twitched in his jaw, and his hand jerked once—the only sign of his nerves.

"Did you read the first chapters in the books I gave you?" He asked.

The question hung heavy between them. She had three choices.

One: tell Titus and have her new teacher carted off to Azkaban. She'd also need to give up her new books, so she liked this option the least.

Two: Keep the books, but figure out why Professor Booth wanted to give them to her in the first place. But then he might not want to give her another one. Maybe he'd think it posed too much of a risk and quit. This scenario didn't appeal to her either.

Three: Let him keep his secrets, read the books he gave her, and possibly get more in the future.

Really, it wasn't a hard choice at all.

"I did," she said. "The content was... fascinating."

A slow grin grew on Professor Booth's face, so wide it showed his teeth.

"I thought you'd see the value in rereading," he said. "When you finish them, I have others I think you might find interesting too."

"I'd like that very much." Hermione walked to her seat, brushing aside a sudden odd guilt, knowing that, once again, she betrayed Titus' trust.

---

In the Spring, after her friends went home, Hermione retreated to her room, pulling out her wand and the spell parchments Titus gave her.

The first list only had simple spells, like Alohomora, Accio, and Lumos—along with harmless little incantations and a few prank hexes. Titus made notes in the margins that he wanted her to practise the prank hexes on Theo. She imagined he grinned when he wrote it.

The new set of spells proved more difficult, but still relatively harmless. They tended to be the opposite of the first list. Depulso, for instance, was the counter-charm to Accio. It took three tries for Hermione to succeed, shoving a book across the room. Reducio came next, a foil to Engorgio. Still, Hermione found it too easy.

She remembered Dumbledore's duel, the spells curving like whips, electrifying the air.

She wished to know how to *truly* duel, not just produce a Protego. The only duelling curses she knew were Reducto, Petrificus Totalus, and Expelliarmus, and even those she'd not yet fully mastered. She'd win a duel if she surprised someone, but not a wizard with a basic Hogwarts education, and certainly not the Order.

Hermione took a breath, looking around. Titus would be gone for several hours still. Tabitha and the elves were working on the front garden. No one would be home.

She went to her closet and wiggled loose a floorboard, a hiding spot she'd found long ago. It served her well for little things she snagged here or there: pieces of discarded homework from Theo, a missive with spells documented on it that Titus had thrown in the bin. But her most important treasure barely fit in her cache. Hermione reached in and took out the spell book, which rested on top of her muggle books. She'd found it in the old quidditch storage room. Made in the mid-1800's, it stayed pristine because of several preservation spells. At one point long ago, a Nott ancestor left his Advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts spell book behind for a quidditch game. To Hermione, it proved more precious than gold.

She pulled it out and sniffed the dusty pages, the spine creaking as she opened it.

Taking out her wand, she gave practice strokes in the air for an advanced defensive charm labelled Expecto Patronum. It repelled Dementors with a spirit familiar, springing from good thoughts, and could be used to send messages without owls. Not that she ever thought she'd need to repel a Dementor, but a person never knew when something could prove useful. After sufficient practice at that, she read the movements for Oculus Lacrimam, a spell that ripped an opponent's eyeballs out. She doubted they still taught the gruesome spell, mostly because it required too many swishes of a wand to be effective in battle.

She was so focused on her studies that she didn't notice the door opening until she heard a gasp. Looking up, she saw Julie frozen in the doorway. Hermione lunged for her friend, tugging her inside and shutting the door.

"That's a wand," Julie said in a soft voice. "A real wand."

"What are you doing here?"

Julie shook her head to orient herself.

"Titus wanted to talk to dad. He said it was okay if I came back to find you."

Hermione's heart rate slowed down.

"Please don't tell," Hermione said. "I promise I'm allowed to have it. Titus gave it to me."

"Why would he do that? He'd get in so much trouble with the ministry."

Hermione hesitated and looked at her friend's wide eyes. Delicate freckles dotted around her body, making her look younger. She'd always been the smallest out of them even though she was the oldest, eighteen already. She only came to the lessons because Bellatrix insisted, and no one was dumb enough to challenge that.

Out of everyone in the world, she trusted Julie with her secrets.

"You have to pinky promise not to tell anyone."

Dean showed them how to do the muggle promise on his second day of lessons. To their small group, it was sacred— an ode to their shared past. *No one* broke the pinky promise.

"Pinky promise," Julie agreed. She reached out her little finger, and Hermione looped hers around it— a solemn vow.

When they broke apart, Hermione lifted her hand and twisted. The candle on the side of her bed lit up into a single quivering flame.

Julie gasped.

"Wandless magic!" She searched Hermione's expression and laid her hand on Hermione's wrist, as if acknowledging the risk. "I won't tell a soul."

"They got me a wand because the ministry ones would be too weak, and my magic could go bad inside me."

Julie's eyes crinkled in concern.

"Did he give you that spell book too?"

Hermione looked down at the book in her hand.

"No, Titus gave me a curriculum, but I find it... boring. He restricts the books I can read, and it's making me go spare. I found this one and hid it."

"The spells in that book are for fighting."

"Yeah," Hermione admitted, unsure how gentle, pure, sweet Julie would feel about her learning serious duelling curses, some of them bordering on dark.

But the look she gave her surprised Hermione. It edged on hunger—the same hunger she felt—eyes shining with excitement.

"Would you be able to teach me?"

"Spells?"

"Wandless magic."

"I don't know. I'm not sure if it can be taught or not, but I think... well, I think I could teach you normal spells. The ones the ministry want you to learn are stupid. What's the point of cleaning and cooking spells when we won't ever use them? You don't have a wand, but we could probably practise the movements with sticks, since the ministry ones might record it if you actually produced magic."

Julie kept her eyes on the wand.

"I don't want to learn fighting spells, but... there's something missing in me. The ministry wands help, but it's painful. The magic in me wants to be used. It's like they're keeping us hobbled, but I don't understand why."

An idea came to Hermione then—a dangerous, rebellious, subversive idea. It didn't stem from wanting to disobey Titus, but she'd never been one to follow rules if her heart told her different. If they were discovered, the consequences might be severe. But magic was as essential to her as water and food, and the more she used it, the bigger space it took up in her soul. Denying muggleborns magic was wrong. She'd felt it even as a child. It was the only thing she really disagreed with Titus on.

"Maybe I can teach *all* of you."

Julie put the edge of her thumb in her mouth, nibbling on her thumbnail, something she often did when anxious, which was most of the time. But after a few minutes of contemplation, she smiled.

"We could be our own coven."

Hermione's whole body erupted into goosebumps.

"Tomorrow, in the treehouse."

Julie nodded, and Hermione showed her how to do simple spells until her master called her away.



---

The next day after lessons, they all climbed into the treehouse.

When Julie first started lessons, everything terrified her, but she'd grown much braver— at least brave enough to go up the bucket rope. She still stayed far away from nature, and if she did go out, she used bug repellent. Finch liked to tease her with frogs and jumping spiders, making her screech each time.

When she crawled up and panted against the wood, everyone gave playful claps.

"Shut up." She groaned and rolled over. "I made it, didn't I?."

Hermione used the moment to pull out her wand. Before the others could comment, she sealed the treehouse, darkening the windows. She placed a candle before her, and with a wave of her hand, the wick caught on fire. In the flickering candlelight, she saw all of their surprised faces.

"Did you just do magic?" Dean asked. "Like *real* magic? With a wand?"

"Yes."

"She wants to teach us," Julie said.

"But we don't have wands," Finch said with a frown. "Not real ones." He stared at her wand with raw jealousy.

"Not yet," Hermione said. "But I'm working on a plan to get them for you."

Hermione launched into the same story she told Julie, from start to finish, from her late-night practice sessions to her near kidnapping. And then the conversation with Lucius and choosing her wand.

"Ollivander said some strange things." Hermione looked at her wand in contemplation. "I think— I think he wants muggleborns to have wands. Maybe if we asked, he'd give them to you. I haven't figured out how to get them yet."

The trepidation turned to excitement. She passed her wand around. It let out jagged blue sparks when Katie clutched it, and they all laughed.

"This needs to be kept secret," she said. "If I teach you magic, you *absolutely* can't get caught, or we'll probably never get to see each other again. We *all* need to agree, understanding the risks, or we can't do it."

They glanced at each other, fearful once again. The thought of ending their lessons clenched her heart. She didn't know if she could have survived the manor all these years— lonely and bored— without them. Theo was her brother, but he didn't understand what it meant to be a muggleborn. Katie, Julie, Dean, and Finch were more than siblings. They had the same beating heart. They all faced the same fate, the same sacrifices and fears. They were all denied the same things, scraping magical leftovers off nearly empty plates to satisfy the starvation.

"I'm in," Katie said.

"Me too." Dean gave a fierce smile.

"I'll do whatever you guys do. I'd never tell a soul. Even if I was caught, I'd never betray any of you." Finch's eyes looked suspiciously red, as if he might cry.

"You already know my answer," Julie said.

Hermione shivered with the danger of what they did, but it didn't stem from fear. A thrilling zip of energy, similar to magic, erupted in her veins.

"Perfect," she said. She grabbed the bag she'd brought up, took out four sticks she'd found—as straight and strong as she could find—and passed them out. "Until we can get proper wands, we can practice the movements and words."

She pulled out the first curriculum Titus gave her. Raising her head, she met the eager eyes of her friends. They already held the sticks aloft. The energy shifted into something with gravity. It tugged them all into sudden orbit, spinning around each other.

"We're the Coven of the Tree," Julie whispered. It was a stupid, ridiculous name, but no one laughed.

Hermione brought up her wand.

"The first charm we'll learn is Alohomora. It's used to unlock doors, though it's useless against wards."

"Alohomora," her friends repeated, copying her movements.

They practised until perfection.

---

Right before Theo went back to Hogwarts for his seventh and final year, Hermione had him against the wall with her wand at his neck.

"What did you promise him?" she demanded.

"You don't have to do it." Theo reached up and shoved the wand aside, knowing she wouldn't harm him even if she really, really, *really* wanted to. "I didn't promise him anything. He just presented the offer, and I said I'd ask you. I thought— well, I thought you'd want to. You wore that stupid smile after the astronomy tower. I just assumed—"

"You just assumed I'd sell him a few kisses, so you'd get a spot on the team."

"Merlin, Hermione, forget I said anything. You know I didn't sell your kisses. He just wants some time alone again. He said if you agreed, he'd let me be a chaser." He looked at her with his stupid pleading eyes, barely blinking his long eyelashes. "Please, Hermione. It's my last year to get on the team. He just wants thirty minutes after each game to have a date."

"What's a date?"

Theo shrugged.

"Just food, snacks. Something to do. It's not serious."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She doubted Draco had innocent endeavours in mind. It should disgust her, but the thought lit a fire under her skin, almost painful.

She still felt his lips on hers. How he dipped down, brushing his mouth against her neck. She wanted to experience it again, despite her protests. Wanted something she didn't have a name for, but that Draco offered to provide.

"Alright." She found it hard to contain her grin. "I'll do it, but it will be on your head if we're caught."

Theo grimaced but nodded. A year of quidditch was apparently worth the risk of possible disembowelment.

Theo leaned over and gave a kiss to her cheek.

"If he tries to push you to do things you're not comfortable with, the deal will end. I'd rather give up quidditch forever if it meant keeping you safe. Only do this if you *want* time with him."

Hermione paused.

"Why are you okay with me being alone with Draco?"

Theo looked introspective.

"I just— I think you deserve to date a boy you like, a boy you choose, before—before—"

*Before I have to live with a man I have no choice in.* A familiar burning started behind her eyes.

"Thanks, Theo."

He gave her a fierce hug, showing her his love.

Later, she lay in bed, thinking of Draco and wondering what it would feel like for his hands to trail down her back the way she saw Titus do to a woman who came over last year. She'd accidently watched as they began to kiss. He'd led the woman backward into his room, pulled her legs up to wrap around his waist, and pushed her dress up with his hands on her thighs, slamming the door behind him. It replayed in her mind sometimes at night, and she imagined herself with different people, but most often with Draco.

In the past year, the fluttering feelings began to get intense, a pain low in her belly. Often it started while watching Titus practice duelling. He'd shed his outer robes, leaving his chest bare. By the end, sweat dripped down the hard planes of his chest.

She'd never seen anyone as fast as him with a wand. He wasn't the most powerful, but he'd curse before his opponent could think of what to cast. It looked like dancing when he was in full training mode: twirl, duck, lunge, with his face set in a dark scowl, as if imagining the Order in front of him.

By the end, she'd always travel back to her room, body tingling. She'd lay in her bed in agony, giving a tempered scream of frustration. Her body needed something, raw with nerves, but she didn't know what or how to make it better.

One day she pressed the skin under her knickers by accident, and a jolt of pleasure went through her. A moment later, she put her hand down as an experiment, trying again. The pleasure arrived a second time, more intense. It felt wrong, dirty. Why was she touching herself down there? But she couldn't stop, chasing the sudden sharp release that happened if she did it enough, followed by a relaxed, pleasant state. She'd do this almost every night, addicted to the feeling. She suspected it mimicked sex. Hermione couldn't find books on it anywhere in the library, but Katie told her enough, and her imagination filled in the rest.

Theo was right. She deserved to be kissed. Deserved to be touched by choice.

And she refused to wait until the Trials.

---

In September, her muggleborn friends arrived for her eighteenth birthday party. Tabitha made a delicious cake, and the elves created edible flowers sprouting along the icing. After food and cake, her friends went home, excited for the weekend to be over to see each other again.

Much later, she sat in front of the fireplace on a couch next to Titus to open gifts. She unwrapped a new dress from Julie, a chilled cauldron cake from Dean, a bookmark charmed to look up definitions on command from Katie, and a book on entomology from Finch.

"Here's Theo's present. He sent it with an owl yesterday." Titus pushed a package into her hands, and she opened the blue fabric eagerly.

"Hogwarts, a History," she said with a gasp. "And it's a first edition! How did he find one?"

Titus gave a sly grin, placing his arm along the back of the couch near her shoulder.

"A lot of sleuthing, some generous donations, and some unethical bribery."

Hermione looked up from her book.

"I hope you didn't spend too much on it."

"Too much? I'd package you the universe, if I could. You only need to ask."

The air felt different for some reason, and she couldn't define it. The fire burned hotter. She wished to adjust the collar on her dress.

She looked up and met his eyes. He stared at her in a funny way, as if wrestling something in his mind.

"I know you haven't been looking forward to today," he said.

Hermione looked back down. She picked at the fabric of her dress.

"No," she whispered. "I don't think I'm ready for the Trials."

"I don't think you are either."

The thought of a baby growing in her stomach only made her feel revulsion. Maybe someday she'd want one, but she felt too young, too inexperienced.

"Can I ask you a favour?"

"Sure," Titus answered.

"I know I have to do my duty, and I will. I just—you told me once I wouldn't have to enter the Trials until twenty-one. Could I wait until then? I don't want to leave yet."

Titus' gaze pierced her, pulling her apart.

"You might change your mind once all your friends go through it."

After the Trials, breeders weren't allowed to talk to unmatched muggleborns. Katie was supposed to leave by Easter, and she wouldn't get to see her until she went through her own. Titus was right—she'd be incredibly lonely.

"Maybe," she said. "But I'd still like the choice."

Titus reached out and grabbed one of her curls that stuck to the back of the couch. He picked it up and examined it, giving a little twirl around his finger. Hermione froze, and then he dropped it, standing up while shaking his head. He walked over and touched the fireplace mantle with a sudden frown and then straightened. "I'm excited to see your face when you see the present I got you. Follow me."

Hermione stood up and followed him back to her room. She raised an eyebrow at him when he opened her door and ushered her inside.

On her bed, curled in a little orange ball, was a tiny kitten.

Everything inside Hermione melted at once.

"You got me a cat!"

She used to beg him for a pet, but he never budged on getting one.

"He's half-kneazle. A familiar. I know you were upset when I said you couldn't have an owl, so I thought it might be nice to have something similar."

"What's his name?"

"The shopkeepers called him Crookshanks, but you can change his name, of course."

"No." Hermione walked over and picked up the creature. He cracked one eye open in annoyance, looking like a grumpy old man. "No, I think he's perfect." She cuddled him close. "Truly, this is the best present."

He gave a soft smile, eyes roving over her as she stood there cuddling her new kitten.

"Happy birthday." He moved to walk out but placed a hand on the doorframe. The Nott signet ring clicked against the wood. "You don't need to worry."

"About what?"

"I promise I won't make you enter into the Trials until you feel more ready. You can wait until the last day possible, if you'd like. I certainly won't be complaining about keeping my Sprite a bit longer."

For the first time all day, Hermione felt like she could take a breath.

The Coven of the Tree by [Frau Blucher](#)



## Chapter 12: Bee to a Flower

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Christian French- "head first"

A/N: This is an epic length story where the world will reveal itself as it goes. This is a single pov fic, and Hermione only knows a small fraction of what is really going on. So the "plot holes" will be filled when she exits her protected bubble.

I forgot to mention in the last update that the Prince of Egypt Easter Egg was the stick turning into a snake.

Standing ovation for my beta, MyPrivateInsanity!

Grey clouds gathered above the quidditch pitch. Droplets of cold dew beaded on her skin as she watched from the stands. Hermione tightened her scarf, attempting to block out the November chill.

Players from both teams zoomed around the pitch, preparing for the game. The Slytherins were up against the Hufflepuffs today. On the opposite side, a few of the players in yellow huddled in a circle, discussing their strategies.

She found Theo first and waved; he looked nervous, hovering in one spot near the hoops. A flash of platinum blond hair rocketed by the stands, and Hermione watched Draco perform several daring flips and rolls right in front of her. Her heart beat pathetically fast in her chest. If she thought he looked handsome in dress robes, it paled in comparison to his quidditch uniform. He looked natural on a broom, as if born to the rigours of flying. After a minute of inspection, Draco caught her looking at him and smirked, blowing her a kiss. Beside her, Titus noticed the interaction and tensed.

"It never ceases to amaze me how much audacity he has. Flirting with you when I'm right fucking here."

"Just ignore him."

Titus examined the smile she tried and failed to hide. He wrinkled his nose and seemed disgusted at her excitement.

"I hope you're not impressed by a few flips on a broom."

"I've never seen *you* do them."

The words came out like a challenge.

An expression crossed Titus' face— one she'd never seen before and couldn't categorise.

"I haven't felt the need to show off. Maybe you're forgetting, but I was—"

"Quidditch captain. Yes, yes, I know. And Head Boy. Never beaten in a duel. Perfect in every way. I thought you weren't trying to show off?"

Titus gave a little snort of laughter.

"You've been around Theo too much— way too sarcastic for your own good."

She opened her mouth to say something, but the approach of someone in dark robes cut her off. She glanced up to be met with a frightening scowl.

"Mr. Nott," Headmaster Snape greeted. He gave a nod of his head to her. "And Miss Hermione."

He had an odd way of talking, drawing out the syllables as if he didn't like the feel of them in his mouth, with a patronising tone behind the words.

Snape sat down next to Titus, flicking the tails of his heavy robe over the seat. His dark hair hung limp and oily over his forehead, and a hooked nose took up much of his face.

"I hate to discuss politics here, but I need assurance we are in agreement for the next step forward," Snape said in a low whisper, keeping his gaze on the pitch.

Titus pondered that, taking his time to answer.

"I'm not sure there's enough evidence. There's no link to him from any of the sources. I could order Veritaserum, but I'd need to find a legal way to do it."

"He should have been in Azkaban from the beginning." The words came out with a hard hiss.

"I agree, but he was pardoned." Titus kept his eyes on Theo. Hermione found it odd that two men could have a whole conversation without looking at each other. "I know your history, and it makes you biased. You can't be a part of the investigation."

Snape clenched his jaw, giving a ferocious frown.

Hermione paid close attention, wondering who they talked about.

"I've waited long enough. A simple search of his home would reveal his allegiance."

"And what then? You have another motive."

"I'd take care of his estate."

"The muggleborn, you mean."

"Yes. She still has a few more years left of fertility, but I'd take her in even if she didn't."



"How magnanimous," Titus mocked. "If you're not aware, she has three children."

"I'm aware," he drawled as if Titus was stupid. "The oldest is almost gone...thankfully. The boy has too much of his father in him. The girl is like her mother and has never misbehaved, and the third is still young enough it would be an easy transition for him. I'm prepared to treat them as my own. I might even make the youngest boy my heir."

Titus paused, eyes watching Theo take careful turns around the pitch as a warmup. Poor Theo looked petrified.

"The muggleborn won't be happy if you take her from her home."

"At first," Snape agreed. "But with James sent to Azkaban for supplying the Order with information, she wouldn't have a choice. It wouldn't be my fault."

Titus snorted.

"Yes, it would. You're the one demanding the investigation."

"She wouldn't *know* it was my fault," Snape amended, rolling his wand in his fingers. "I trust your silence on the matter when it comes time to ease the transition. James was an Order member in the war. He pretends to have given it up. I have no proof he's still active, but the suspicion is warranted, especially as activity has increased, and we know Sirius Black is alive. The information they sent in the last ultimatum sounds like someone from the inside has been supplying information, and James works for the ministry. If they succeed, they'll take all the muggleborns, including your ward."

Hermione froze at the mention of the Order, and Titus reached down his hand and grabbed hers, giving a squeeze to reassure her.

"Out of everyone, I understand the threat," Titus said in a low voice. "But I have to follow the rules. I can't just raid a pureblood estate on a whim. However... I promise to investigate it. If there's any evidence, I'll let you know."

Snape gave a slow nod.

"I will forever be in your debt." He emphasised the last word. "James deserves all that is coming to him."

Titus looked troubled.

"If it's a muggleborn you're wanting, there are a few Trials coming up you could compete in. Despite your age, you'd win in a duel, and your intelligence is well known. You'd succeed, depending on the other competitors."

Snape looked violent at the suggestion, lips pulled back to show his teeth.

"I don't want another muggleborn. What would I do with a girl half my age? I'm surrounded by the twittering idiots every day. Living with one would be a nightmare."

Titus gave a laugh, but he tilted his head.

"As you wish."

"Good day, Mr. Nott."

Snape stiffly rose and walked away.

Titus was still long after Snape left, as if turning the situation over in his head. When the whistle blew to begin the game, Titus kept her hand in his firm grasp.

---

Theo played terribly as a chaser. He got hit by a bludger at the beginning of the game. When he got taken out for the injury, his whole team seemed relieved.

The Hufflepuffs played dirtier than she expected, given their nature, but maybe Slytherins brought the worst out in people.

Draco kept his eye on the air, searching for the tiny flutter of the Golden Snitch. Occasionally, she felt his gaze shift to her, though she tried to ignore it. It still caused a flush to spread up her cheeks, wondering if he appreciated the time and effort she put into her appearance for their date.

The game bored her, so her mind wandered, thinking about her date later. And then her mind couldn't help but linger on thoughts she shouldn't.

Titus had let go of her hand long ago, but she still felt the warmth and the callouses. She wished to pick his hand back up again and trace the lines on his palm. She wondered how many women he'd touched with them. Did he slide them down their breasts, their hips? Did he—

Titus grabbed Hermione's arm, jolting her from her thoughts. Her eyes snapped up to see Draco's broom barreling toward them, too fast to move out of the way.

Instead of a collision, Draco pulled to a magnificent stop, just inches from her. He grabbed beside her ear, fingers trailing down her cheek, lifting a few strands of hair. Before she could react, he pulled back his hand to show the Golden Snitch fluttering in his palm, right in front of her eyes.

A devastating smirk tilted up his lips. "The snitch must have been attracted to beauty, like a bee to a flower."

Titus shoved him away. He wobbled on the broom but righted himself.

"Get the fuck away from her!" Titus stood up with his wand pointed at Malfoy. The entire stadium went silent with the confrontation, but Draco just rolled his eyes.

"I was just catching the snitch, Nott. Didn't mean to... unsettle you."

Hermione's heart raced, and a latent shot of anxiety raced through her.

"I'm not sure how you engineered that, Malfoy. But get that close to her again—game or not — and your father will have to reattach body parts."

Draco backed away, still clutching the snitch. He wore a smirk, eyes flashing like mercury, which told Titus he both engineered the touch, and he'd do it again if he wanted.

They both glared at each other, neither backing down, until the Slytherins began to celebrate their win behind him, releasing bursts of confetti in the air.

Draco gave another daring wink.

"Like a bee to a flower," he repeated, flying off toward his teammates.

Titus seethed next to her, reluctantly pocketing his wand. She'd rarely seen him so angry. The students and parents closest to them silently scooted away, giving him furtive looks as he clenched and unclenched his wand hand.

"I might just kill that spoiled wanker one day. If his father wasn't Lucius Malfoy, I would have already."

---

After the game, they exited the stands and went into the castle, waiting for Theo to get out of the infirmary.

Titus remained tense from the confrontation with Draco, frowning and with a hand on his wand. The veins in his hands raised as he clenched it hard.

Hermione touched his arm, worried about his anger. His eyes snapped down to her.

"It's okay," she said. "Nothing happened."

"He touched you."

"Barely. My cheek and my hair." She picked up his free hand and rested it against her cheek. "See, it doesn't mean anything."

His eyes searched her face, and he slid his hand away. The calluses pricked her skin.

"Touch always has meaning." Titus' expression once again hardened, looking down at the hand she had put on her face. "I don't like how you look at Malfoy."

"I can't think he's handsome? He might be my future wizard."

Titus wore a disgusted snarl.

"It doesn't matter what you think of him. That little shite doesn't deserve you. He won't be your future wizard. I'll make sure of that. Lucius thinks he can corner me into what he wants, but I'm not one to be manipulated."

Hermione didn't like that. The trials were based on fairness. Three or more wizards competed, and the best won. She didn't think Titus should *let* Draco win, but she didn't think he should make him lose either.

"How would you do that?"

"I've had an idea, but I'm still unsure if I should proceed with it. There are a lot of variables to the plan that I need to smooth out."

"And you won't tell me?"

Titus gave a smile. It held a private edge to it, knowing a joke she didn't.

"One day, perhaps."

Hermione frowned, not liking him keeping things from her.

"I'm going to try and figure it out."

All of his anger melted away as he stared at her. He took a step closer to her, and she looked up into his face.

"Of course, you will," he said. "But I must warn you that you won't discover the plan in the library."

"That sounds like a challenge."

He looked like he might say more, but his eyes flicked up. He stepped away from her as Theo walked closer, looking dejected and with his arm in a sling.

"I'd say good game," Titus teased, "But you weren't in it but for a few minutes."

"That Hufflepuff targeted me on purpose," Theo protested.

Titus rolled his eyes and motioned to his arm.

"What did Pomfrey say?"

"I need to keep it on for the day to stabilise it, but it can come off tomorrow." He glanced at Hermione, revealing his nerves with his wide eyes. "Can I show Hermione more of the castle? I wanted her to see the giant squid."

"We need to be fast. I have to be back at the ministry in an hour."

Theo grimaced. Hermione wondered what Draco would do to Theo if he didn't hold up his end of the bargain.

"Don't you need to talk to Snape or something?" Theo asked.

"I already—"

"No, he needs to talk to me," a drawling voice said. Lucius and his cane clicked against the stone, until he faced Titus. "Run along while I speak with your master."

Titus pulled his lip into a silent snarl.

"They aren't going anywhere, and I have nothing to say to you. Draco is playing with fire. Any more stunts like that, and our deal is off, promise or not."

"The folly of youth." Lucius gave a flippant wave of his hand. "I'll speak to him." His eyes slid to Hermione, examining her as if he was stripping her of her skin and studying her bones. "But I didn't come over here to talk about Draco. The information I have is more... sensitive, and it's imperative I tell you about it today."

Titus turned serious—his work face—transforming from soft to hard. He glared at Theo.

"Go ahead and take her to the lake and to the library. I want her back here in an hour, and not a second later. And don't you dare leave her alone, or you won't like the punishment I'd give you."

Theo gave a visible swallow. The flickering torches reflected off his glasses, so she couldn't see his expression, but she suspected he might be regretting the deal he'd made.

---

Theo didn't take her to the lake, though she did wish to see the squid and the mermaids. Instead, he took her along a maze of hallways, the ancient stones surrounding her like a comforting arrived at a giant painting of a fruit bowl. Theo reached forward and tickled the pear situated in the center, and it giggled, turning into a green door handle. Theo reached out and opened it, but he hesitated, crinkling his brows.

"Are you sure you want to do this? There are several nice normal blokes to date."

Hermione took a moment to think about it. Did she like Draco? She didn't know much about him, besides what they talked about in their letters.

But did she find him attractive?

Yes.

Oh, yes.

Just the thought of him in his quidditch uniform made her stomach tighten.

*Like a bee to a flower.*

Besides, another boy wouldn't dare go against Titus to date her or kiss her or touch her.

But Draco would.

Before she could answer Theo's question, Draco opened the door. The light behind him framed his hair, giving him a halo. His silver eyes pierced through her. He'd cleaned up from

the game, freshly showered, wearing his Hogwarts uniform, but his cheeks still flushed a healthy colour from activity. He'd slicked his fair hair back and to the side in an attractive style.

The last time she'd been this close to him he'd been a boy, but this time, he looked almost a man. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. She'd thought a lot about this day, often taking out the multiple letters he'd sent her over the past several years to read over at night. After the first round of questioning, many of his letters were like diary entries. He still asked her questions, but he talked about his day, what he hated, what he liked, who he talked to, who he sat by. She answered him in kind.

She thought she'd feel comfortable around him, but the instant his silver gaze fell on her, he felt like a separate person from the boy writing her letters— a stranger.

"Nice normal blokes aren't as interesting as me." Draco turned to Theo and gave him a frown. "I'll bring her back in fifty minutes."

"Forty," Theo said. "We can't take chances. Titus has been on edge. He might kill you if he finds you with her, damn the consequences."

"He *won't* find her with me."

Theo hesitated, giving a glance to Hermione to see if she was okay, and then he walked a little way back and rested against the wall.

"I'll be right around the corner."

Draco turned to her with a crooked grin, eyes like a spark, ready to burn her. He grabbed her hand, and the contact jolted her. In all her life, she'd only touched a few people beyond her friends, Titus, Tabitha, and Theo. His hands were just as callused as Titus' were, but maybe more elegant with long fingers and trimmed nails. He brought her hand to his mouth and let his full lips rest against her knuckles.

"Let me show you a good time."

Hermione followed Draco into a room with five long tables. Pots and pans lined the stone walls. A large fireplace roared on the opposite wall. Stoves and ovens were in multiple locations. It smelled like sugar and fresh baked bread, a comfortable and homey place.

"The Hogwarts kitchen," he explained. "It's attached to the Great Hall." He pulled a parchment out of his pocket. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." He touched his wand to the paper, and the ink twisted and spread.

"The Marauder's Map?" Hermione asked, reading the title. She attempted to grab the parchment in curious excitement to study it, but he held it aloft.

"Not a chance, Granger," he said. "This is all mine, but I'll let you look, if you stop acting like such a greedy swot."

He brought it down and put it between them as he unfolded it to show a map of Hogwarts, with little footprints showing where each person was located.

"Brilliant!" Hermione wondered what charms were used to create it. "Where did you get it?"

"Stole it from Potter. Rather useful, I think. As long as we keep an eye on Nott's location, we'll be fine."

She saw Titus' footsteps alongside Lucius and Headmaster Snape. They were near the owlery.

"After tonight, you need to give that back to Harry," she said. If Harry was Theo's friend, then he was her friend.

Draco paused and tilted his head.

"You don't like that four-eyed bastard, do you?"

"And if I do?"

Draco made a terrible face.

"Theo's corrupted you. Potter's the bane of my existence."

"Only because he always beats you at quidditch."

The tops of his cheeks turned red.

"Theo is getting on my last nerve. Potter is just abnormally lucky." He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. Hermione realised he might be a little nervous. "This is going badly." He groaned. "Fine, I'll stop pranking Potter for a month. Would that make you happy?"

"And the map?"

He grimaced, as if she asked for his first-born child.

"I'll consider it." He led her to one of the tables, containing two goblets of pumpkin juice and cauldron cakes—her favourites. He'd paid attention to her letters, it seemed. She wondered if he reread them obsessively like she did.

Hermione sat, taking a bite of her cake before she even relaxed. Draco took a spot opposite to her, staring at her as she inhaled the dessert, paying attention to her mouth.

"What have you planned for this *date*?" She sipped the pumpkin juice.

"Something I promised you long ago."

He pulled a box out from beside him and set it on the table. Upon unfolding, it revealed its contents to be Wizards Chess—an expensive version with silver and gold-plated pieces with

diamonds for eyes. A bit too gaudy for Hermione's taste, but she knew fine craftsmanship when she saw it.

"You remember that?"

"I remember every interaction of ours."

That made her a little wary.

"I won't go easy on you," she warned.

"Don't play nice," he said. "Blaise is terrible at chess, Goyle is dumb as a Pygmy Puff, and the elves always let me win. I want a real challenge for once."

"Will you cry if you lose to me like you do with Harry?"

Something dark sparked behind his eyes. It made the blood thrum in her veins.

With a flick of his wand, the pieces stood at attention. The horse pawed at the ground in agitation.

"I only possess one good intention, and it's hanging by a thread," he said. "I've waited years to have you alone again. One more statement like that, and your mouth will be too occupied to deliver any insults. Now, do you want to play or not?"

Hermione clenched her thighs together at the thought of what he promised. She almost said something else, wanting to know where it would lead them. But she really did want to play chess too.

She slid a pawn across the board, starting the game. Draco seemed surprised by her initial move.

The fire snapped in the background as they played, the only sound besides marble scraping against marble and the crack of the pieces as one slaughtered the other.

The game didn't last long. Draco believed he was good at strategy, but she learned chess from Katie, who had quite the mind for the game.

"Checkmate," she said after only thirty minutes of intense playing.

He blinked.

"There's no fucking way." He rubbed his eyes. "No one wins against me."

"Except me."

His eyes flicked up, darkening, as if he wanted to consume her. Hermione stopped breathing with the tension, spine snapped straight, just waiting for the moment the subtle string exploded between them.



"Except you." Something sunk in his expression, as if falling. "It seems you're always the exception."

A beat of silence, and then he lunged across the table, shoving his gold-plated chess set out of the way. It clattered to the ground as he grabbed the sides of her face and pulled her into a brutal kiss that seared across her body. He tangled his fingers in her hair and groaned into her mouth, while climbing over the table, mouth still attached. He stood and yanked her up with him. Both hands travelled down her back, following the curve of her bottom, and then down to the back of her knees, just like her fantasy. He lifted and spread her legs, curling them around his waist, keeping his hands on her thighs as he walked. Soon her back pressed against the stone wall in between several frying pans. The weight of him felt glorious pressed tight against her.

He broke the kiss, trailing his lips to her neck, right under her ear like he had in the Astronomy tower, and she gasped at the feeling. Every touch sparked like a jolt of magic.

"I'm not going to allow anyone else to win you," he groaned against her skin. "And once you're mine, I'm going to give you everything."

"Hm," she replied, tilting her neck up so he could have better access. The heat of his tongue replaced his lips, and she curled her fingers into his clothes with a frantic energy. "Viktor Krum also put his token in. He wants to give me everything too."

She knew he smiled by the way his lips twisted near her throat.

"You always know just the thing to rile me up," His hands slid up her thighs, pushing her dress up as he went, until it pooled around her waist. She wore green knickers just for him, but he didn't look down, transferring his hands to her hips.

She'd *never* had the bare skin of her thighs touched. Her body erupted in goosebumps.

When he kissed her again, she opened her mouth, enjoying the taste of him. It seemed he was content to continue like this, but she wanted more—wanted what she'd been thinking about for months. And if she didn't try it now, she might never get the chance again. With a flicker of courage born of pure desire, she grabbed one of his hands and tugged it sideways, dragging it lower.

"What are you doing?" Draco's eyes snapped up, and he pulled his hand away, studying her.

Hermione froze in a moment of instant mortification. Maybe he didn't understand what she was doing.

"Well, sometimes I—I mean, when you touch—"

"No, I know what you're asking me to do. I just didn't realise you'd know—"

"I just want to experiment." Merlin, her face felt hot. This was embarrassing and not how it played out in her mind.

"I'm just checking if you're sure?"

Was he an idiot? She was the one who put his hand there. She didn't want to go slow. She wanted to burn and explode. Her curiosity compelled her, and her body urged her forward. There wasn't a single part of her mind that wanted to stop.

"If you don't start right now, I'll finish it myself."

"Bloody hell," he groaned, eyes rolling back in pained disbelief before he focused on her once more.

His hand trailed down, but right before he reached his destination, her body spasmed with an odd fear. Doing this by herself was one thing. If he'd kept his mouth shut, she probably could have continued off pure adrenaline. But he'd stopped, and her brain caught up.

"Wait," she said.

He stopped instantly. The heat of his fingers hovered right over the spot she usually touched. If she pushed forward, she knew it would bring her relief from the tension that was starting to feel like pain. His hand trembled, as if he felt the same mixture of excitement, desire, and trepidation. "I think—I don't know if I— I'm sorry."

"Don't be fucking sorry." He placed his hand back on her hip. "You're allowed to change your mind. Everything is up to you."

A shot of disappointment went through her. Mostly, at herself. She'd wanted him to touch her. She'd planned for it, body taut with tension, wishing to experience the sexual freedom that Titus seemed to enjoy. But the reality was messier than what her brain conjured, filled with consequences and a living human that had his own thoughts and desires.

"I don't want this to be anything serious," she explained, saying her biggest fear out loud. "I'm not ready for— not until things are certain. You understand, right?"

He gave an ugly sneer and looked like he might respond, but there was a knock on the door. She knew it was Theo.

Malfoy didn't let her go, fingers digging into her hips. He leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together.

"It won't be long until the next game," he said as if to comfort himself. "My father promised to create another diversion so we can meet."

Lucius helped arrange the meeting. Or maybe he just indulged the plea of his only son. She'd thought something was odd about his interruption.

"I need to go," she said.

"Give me a moment." He breathed hard and gave her a soft kiss, a sharp juxtaposition to the last one. "The things I have to do to get you alone— the years I have to wait—and I only get a fraction of the time that I want."

The intensity behind it—the obsession—made her wary. But, despite that, a low thrill bloomed in her stomach, feeling on the edge of danger, like dangling in the air on a broom.

"One day, I won't have to let you go," he whispered.

She almost corrected him, annoyed with his certainty.

"But today you do." She shoved at his shoulders until he let her go, and she stepped out of his hold. Instantly, she missed his body heat. The imprint of his hands remained on her hips.

She walked to the door, giving one last look over her shoulder. He glanced down at his hand—the one that had hovered over her knickers—and then he met her stare with a dark expression.

"Next time, I'd like to taste you."

Hermione blushed, unsure what he meant, but it sounded filthy in a way that made the blooming warmth in her stomach spread along her lower body. She tried to shake it off as she exited the room.

When she walked out, she found Theo. He shook his head at her appearance.

"You don't need to tell me you kissed him," he said. "Let me fix it, or Titus will have my head."

Theo touched up her makeup and hair.

"Did you have fun?" He asked when he finished.

"Very much so. I murdered him at chess."

"That's my girl," Theo said proudly. "I rely on you to curb his ego."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a parchment. Even though she'd crumpled it, the page straightened again. She handed the map to Theo, having stolen it from Draco during the chess game.

"Give this back to Harry."

She wished she could view Draco's reaction when he discovered it gone.

He really should pay closer attention to his belongings.

By [Frau Blucher](#)

 First Date

# Chapter 13: Wildfire Whiz-bangs

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Kiki Rockwell- "Same Old Energy"

As always, this chapter is 100% better because of my beta, MyPrivateInsanity!

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

## Wildfire Whiz-bangs

Hermione found Titus in his study. It looked meticulously organised and clean as always. A single pot of ink rested next to a stack of parchment on the ancient wood.

The desk was her favourite piece of furniture in the manor, showcasing the story of Atherol Nott— a dragon knight from the fourteenth century— on three heavy panels of wood attached with a thick top. Much like the portraits, the carving came to life. As Hermione walked in, the dragon launched into the sky, splinters of fire erupting from its mouth in a silent roar. And when she sat in a chair across from Titus, Atherol brandished his sword as if to fight her.

Titus looked regal, framed by the light from the window, still in his Auror uniform and armour from an early morning mission. His blue eyes flicked up once to acknowledge her entrance before returning to his task.

Hermione knew she'd need to use every bit of her cunning to enact her plan. Since the auror tried to kidnap her, Titus didn't like her to go out without him, but she needed a new robe and a few books to read—at least, that's what she'd tell him. Her real reason was far more dangerous.

She listened to the comforting scratch of his quill, watching his intense concentration on his task. When he finally finished filling out the last parchment, he looked up, studying her until he frowned.

"You want something, but you think I might say no." He narrowed his eyes.

"How could you possibly know that?"

"You bounce your right leg when you're nervous." He pointed to his face. "And you lift your eyebrows a little, forcing your eyes to go big and round, already pleading." He leaned back in his chair, hands clasped across his stomach. "What do you want?"

Hermione took a breath.

"Diagon Alley."

"No." Titus leaned forward and grabbed his quill again, as if to dismiss her.

"But that's not fair."

He grimaced.

"Your safety is more important than being fair."

Hermione bit back a frustrated scream. She hated being treated like porcelain, one fall away from shattering.

"I need more to do than wandering the manor and having friends over. I'm going insane cooped up in here. It will be weeks before Theo is home, and you're always working."

The harsh lines of his shoulders relaxed, and he gave a deep sigh.

"Are you feeling neglected?" He looked at her in a sharp way, full of analysis.

She frowned. He said that as if she was some fussy, exotic plant that needed correct sunlight and attention to flourish.

"No," she said. "I just want a change of scenery."

Maybe she did feel neglected. Titus was her only outlet to the outside world. When he had time, he'd always taken her on shopping trips or to the ministry, but he'd been more busy than usual. The past few weeks she barely saw him.

However, her plans went further than a simple shopping trip this time, so she'd take the ego hit if it meant getting to go.

"You lie so well," he said. "But not well enough. You're right. I think it's time I took a break and spent time with you. Books and then ice cream, like normal. Does that sound good?"

Good enough. She'd prefer some random auror, because it would be easier to slip things by them, but she thought she could fool Titus.

If she was careful.

---

The plan had long been set in motion. The boys were less guarded than the girls, so she relied on them for the initial contact. Dean—the braver of the two boys— had followed Ollivander when he'd exited his shop. He'd waited until his auror was distracted before "accidentally" knocking into the old man, slipping a note into his wrinkled hand while steadying him.

It was a risk— the biggest one their tiny coven had ever attempted. The first rebellion. It all hinged on a small look Ollivander had given Titus along with a few misplaced words, hinting toward the idea the wand maker didn't agree with the current ban of magic for muggleborns.

The note read:

**Four muggleborns need wands. If you're willing to give them, leave a note outside your shop under a stone near the door, telling us your answer.**

It had taken three weeks for the stone to show up. It seemed the wand maker needed to consider the risk, which Hermione understood. She still remembered Titus' threatening tone toward him. The punishment for giving them wands might be severe. Still, they had no other option.

Each day had dragged, waiting for an answer. They all checked, asking their masters in turns to go. Hermione only managed to walk by once and tried to not be disappointed seeing the barren doorway. It would devastate her friends to reach a dead-end, especially since none of them grasped wandless magic, besides an accidental spark made by Julie.

But then, one day, the stone showed up, agreeing to their request for help.

They exchanged several notes this way, until all four of them got a chance to stand before the store, so Ollivander could glance at them through the window. The old man had a sixth sense when it came to wand cores and matching them with wizards. Still, the first time he'd sent a wand—one for Finch—it did nothing but almost zap Julie with an errant spark of magic. Since then, they enacted a complicated merry-go-round of wands.

Hermione had charmed a purse for the girls that they passed around that could shrink down anything to fit into a small space, which she hoped would fool their masters. She'd given the boys a shopping bag, which sported the same charms. So far no one had been the wiser of their sleights of hand, though Hermione worried that one day their luck would run out.

At the present moment, Hermione wore her black leather purse tight against her body as they walked down Diagon Alley. Titus looked at it with one eyebrow raised.

"I've never seen you wear a purse."

Of course, he would notice.

And he was right. She never needed her own galleons in Diagon Alley.

"Fashion, Titus," she answered.

He gave a snort.

"When have you cared about fashion? I almost have to beg you to pick out new clothes from the current catalogues."

"You caught me," Hermione said. "I'm using it to carry my extra books in case I read through my main one."

"That sounds more like it, though it looks much too small for its purpose. Perhaps next time you could bring something larger."

"Fair point."

He placed a hand on the small of her back, leading her through the crowd, and something warm zipped up her spine.

Honestly, she didn't lie about carrying books. Their first stop had been at the bookstore, and she'd pilfered a few tomes, placing them into the depths of her purse, hoping they contained new knowledge. She didn't have much time to examine what she'd stolen, but she planned to add them to her mini library hidden in the treehouse by a simple charm. Only if they proved interesting. She'd run out of space under her floorboard a long time ago, but she wasn't too worried. Titus never went up there, so there was a statistically low chance he'd find them. They'd be placed next to the newest muggle books Professor Booth gave her on Calculus and Microbiology.

At the moment, they walked side by side down the street without destination, just enjoying the day. At least, that's what Titus thought. In reality, she was leading them by Ollivanders wand shop.

"Having fun, Sprite?" he asked.

"Bunches," she said and gave a little skip of her feet to show him. Despite her mission, It felt great to be out, seeing something different than her normal four walls.

But she didn't let it distract her from her plan.

When Titus turned his head, she pulled out a small box from her purse and held it to her side. Titus twisted back around, and she smiled at him, hoping it didn't look suspicious. His eyes lingered on her face in a soft way, lifting up half a smile, letting a single dimple show—the type of charming smirk that she'd seen him give pretty witches. No matter how many times she'd seen it, the grin still almost made her trip on her shoes.

Earlier in the year, Theo gave her the trick box as a secret birthday present. The Weasley twins invented it, though they hadn't tested it. Theo told her the two men were either future entrepreneurs or future criminals, and there wouldn't be an in-between. Hermione wished she could meet them. She loved Theo's stories of them tormenting Filch and Headmaster Snape. On the last day of seventh year, they'd even turned the great hall into a swamp and flew away to the cheers of students.

She held their latest idea—Wildfire Whiz-bangs.

The prank might be enough to pull Titus away from her side.

"We should stop by the quidditch store and get something for Theo before we go," Titus said. "He doesn't get to play much, but I'd prefer he wear quality equipment."

Hermione gave a nod in agreement. They were now in front of Ollivanders, and Hermione groaned internally. Titus kept staring at her, and she needed his attention to be on something else or else the whole day would be for nothing.

"Do you think we could go over there after?" She pointed to a store across the street.

Titus turned his head, and she used the distraction to act. She threw the box and watched it land. With a quick wandless stunning spell, it exploded. Fireworks burst around them in a glorious display.

Within seconds, Titus grabbed her and shoved her to the ground, putting his body over her with his wand out. When he realised it was just fireworks and not some errant explosion, his stance loosened.

"Who the fuck did that?" He got off her, leaving an odd warmth along her body. No one paid attention to his furious demand, because the fireworks kept coming. Each time someone tried to vanish them, they multiplied. Hermione laughed and then covered her mouth. Titus turned his sharp gaze on her for a moment.

"Don't move," he said. "It's probably just a couple of dumb kids that need to learn a lesson."

"Don't be too hard on them." Hermione watched him stalk away.

In the chaos, Hermione scooted to the edge of the building. A small bag of garbage awaited her. At least, it looked like garbage, charmed to hide the wands. She picked it up and shoved it in her purse and then scooted back to her spot.

Titus didn't seem to notice that she'd moved, so she sat there and waited, whistling and fidgeting.

It took several minutes for him to return to her.

"Did you find the dumb kids?"

"No," he said. "But this has those fucking Weasley twins written all over it. They are a menace to society."

"Seemed like harmless fun."

Again, he looked at her, examining her. As an auror, he'd been trained in body language, able to tell when someone lied or was nervous. She controlled herself as much as possible.

"Harmless fun," he repeated in a dry tone. "Well, it cut our day short. I'm going to need to go to the ministry to sort out the complaints."

---

Titus' mood darkened as they apparated home. Hermione endured the unpleasant pop and reappearance as he guided her inside.

"Are you going to the ministry now?" She asked, a little worried. Titus was usually placid. He rarely showed a bad mood in front of her, but he seemed to be seething.

"Not anymore. There are a few new hires that can handle it. I think I already discovered the culprit, and it's not someone I can name."



"Oh, okay."

They stood in the foyer, the giant chandelier dangling above them. She tried to walk toward her room, but he grabbed her upper arm near her shoulder.

His intelligent blue eyes now narrowed on her, and she instantly felt dissected.

"Where did you get it?"

"What?" She asked, heart pounding. He tugged her around to face him, pulling her close. Her chest heaved against him as he glared down at her.

He'd never done anything like this—an interrogation—as if she was one of his criminals.

He loosened his hold on her shoulder but leaned down. She glanced up at his eyes, viewing them closer than she ever had before. Flecks of white dotted the center with a dark outer ring. She thought she might see a little green buried in the blue. If they resembled water, now they were a storm.

"The fireworks. Where did you get them?"

"You're scaring me."

"Answer me!"

She flinched. He'd never yelled at her like that before.

Hermione knew she'd need to admit something if she wanted to lower suspicion. She'd lied several times that day, so she picked the least volatile one.

"Theo," she admitted. She tried to tug away, but his grip tightened, keeping them close together. "The Weasley twins gave it to him. You were right that they invented it. I—I didn't mean anything by it. Just a funny prank. I thought you'd laugh."

His jaw muscles clenched.

"It wasn't just a prank." He pushed her shoulder, walking with her until her back pressed against the wall, right next to a portrait. "What were you trying to distract me from?"

Hermione swallowed hard. She shouldn't have attempted this with Titus present. He was too observant. He let go of her shoulder now and placed both hands on the wall beside her head.

If he found the wand, Ollivander would be placed in Azkaban for helping them, and she'd never see her friends again. It had felt like a game until now, but the consequences would be dire.

She decided to tell another lie with a truth.

"I saw the book on the side of the street. Someone must have dropped it."

"Take it out of the *fucking* purse."

She flinched at his tone.

With shaking fingers, she reached into the purse and took out one of the books. It was a blind grab, so she hoped it would be good enough to fool him. When she saw the cover, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Dark Spells from Dark Wizards. It was controversial enough it contributed to the lie.

Titus grabbed it and straightened. He flipped it over and skimmed through it.

"You charmed the purse," he said, snapping the book shut and throwing it to the side. Hermione flinched when it landed. He didn't have to treat the book that way. "I'd be impressed if I wasn't so angry. What were you intending with this?"

Hermione crossed her arms on her chest.

"To learn something new for a fucking change."

He glared at her tone and language, even if he had just used the same against her.

"I provide you with countless opportunities to learn new things. What are the tutors I pay for, if not to learn? Do you think other muggleborns get the same opportunity?"

Hermione took a deep breath and pushed it out through her nose.

"I want to learn *real* magic," she said. "Half the library is off limits. I need... I need something more than what I'm getting."

Titus leaned toward her, crowding into her space.

"I've given you *everything* you need, even a fucking wand." He once again placed his hands next to her head on the wall. It made her nervous in a way she didn't understand. "Do you even know what would happen to me if the ministry discovered I'd given you one? I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm attempting to protect you."

She believed he held good intentions despite his harsh tone, but she felt too distracted by his proximity to respond. Her mouth felt dry.

"I'm going to need to take your purse," he said.

That absolutely could not happen. Her wards were pathetic—only basic ones. Titus could break through them in five minutes. She needed to keep it away from him.

She acted on pure instinct and brought one hand up and placed it on his neck, wondering if begging would soften him. His pulse thumped against her palm as she touched his heated skin. The tendons and muscles tightened beneath her fingers.

"Please, don't take it. The purse is the first thing I've ever created." She glanced up, giving a pleading expression, one that usually made him give in, but he only tensed up. "I just saw the book and wanted to see what it was. That's all."

"You have another book, don't you?"

Hermione hated giving up another, but she had no choice.

"Yes." She groaned, sliding her hand off his neck.

"Let me see."

She dug down and brought up the other, pressing her teeth together in agitation. The book she brought out was thicker than the other one and something she realised that she'd already read.

"The Magical History of the Roman Empire." He turned it over and handed it back. She slipped it back into her purse. "I shouldn't even let you have this one, but it's innocuous. Are these all the books you have?"

She was lucky he asked for *books* and not *items*, or else he might see through the lie. Luckily, she could answer the truth.

"Yes," she said. "Can I go to my room?"

She needed to get out before he asked to rifle through the purse contents.

But Titus didn't move out of her space. He leaned down, so that their faces were level. He smelled of cinnamon and something purely Titus. She resisted the desire to take a deep breath of the pleasant scent so close to the source, reminding her of comfort.

"You tried to manipulate me." His teeth flashed white with his grimace. "You're playing a game you don't understand. It's a form of power, I admit, but only if you know how to use it." He reached out and placed his palm against her cheek. It was rough and large, the calluses prickling her skin. "Right now, you're so naive. There's so much you don't know about life that I wish I could explain to you."

Her stomach tumbled. Titus talked in riddles. Was he mocking her? He must have seen the confusion on her face, because he frowned and let her go with a frustrated sound.

"Just go to your room."

She took the reprieve and ran to the exit, only looking back once to see Titus glaring at the ground, hand still braced on the wall.

---

Several days later, she crawled into the treehouse. She darkened the windows just in case Titus became curious. Since the incident, she'd been hesitant around him for reasons she didn't quite understand. Her vocabulary didn't contain the explanation for what she felt. She'd barely seen him, and when she did, she found a way to leave the room.

Katie, Julie, Finch, and Dean sat in a circle in the treehouse, waiting for her. Each of them had gone through several wands before finding their match. Ollivander was quite skilled at matching wands to their owners, but he operated at a disadvantage with them, since none of them could stand in his store while he chose wands for them to try. After much trial and error, Julie, Dean, and Finch had each found their wands, leaving only Katie without one.

Hermione reached into her purse and extracted the illicit wand.

"Let's see if this one works," she told Katie. Her friend took a deep breath, reached out and clasped the wand in her hand. Brilliant sparks erupted from the tip, bathing the room in celebratory light. Katie opened her mouth in awe, Julie squealed in happiness, Finch began to cry, and Dean gave a loud whoop.

Hermione waited for everyone to settle down to bring up the serious discussion points.

"We'll need to keep the wands hidden here," Hermione said.

"What happens when I leave?" Katie asked. All of them tensed up with the question. The thought of Katie leaving sent spikes of anxiety through her.

"You might have to keep it here until I go to the Trials," Hermione said. "After that, I'll try to smuggle it to you. Do you think Flint would get angry if he found it?"

Everyone knew Flint would win. He'd paid her masters to rig the Trials in his favour, so they only accepted tokens from wizards they knew he'd win against. Hermione had been mad when she heard about it, but Katie was resigned to her fate, saying he was a better choice than some, and the Goyles needed money.

Katie shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know him much. You wouldn't think it by seeing him, but he's shy. Every time he tries to talk to me, he usually just stammers out something awkward and walks away. He was even willing to wait to start the Trials, but my masters grew impatient."

"We'd better not take the chance," Dean said, and Katie agreed.

"And what about you?" Hermione turned to Julie. "Do you still think you can keep this from your mum?"

Bellatrix was a master legilimens, but luckily Julie was a natural occlumens. Hermione suspected it had something to do with her pleasant nature, able to calmly compartmentalise her emotions.

"Of course," she said. "She can't use legilimency on me without ripping my mind. It's her fault she taught me occlumency in the first place."

Julie might be the only human not afraid of the witch, but Hermione trusted her judgement.

"We're complete now." Hermione raised her wand, flicking a little lumos. The others did the same, and they touched in the middle. "The Coven of the Tree."

"The Coven of the Tree," they repeated. They'd said it as a joke at first, but it sounded serious now, like they were something to contend with—educated muggleborns enacting real magic with wands. They were everything they weren't supposed to be. A deep pride filled Hermione that they managed the impossible. She wished she could hug Ollivander.

Maybe someday she could convince Titus it was okay for muggleborns to have wands. If she could convince Titus, she could convince anyone.

---

A few days later, Hermione stumbled across a woman stepping out of the floo. She was tall, blond, and wore strappy shoes that had a point on the back, pushing up her heels, showcasing her skirt hit the middle of her thighs, revealing a scandalous amount of skin.

The woman startled when she saw Hermione, putting a hand to her chest with a little laugh.

"Who are you?" Hermione asked.

"I'm here for Titus."

Oh, she was one of his women. Hermione somehow withheld her instinctive sneer.

But this one was different than normal. It took her a moment to realise the woman was obviously a *muggle*. Titus only slept with purebloods or halfbloods. *Never* muggles. It didn't make any sense.

The woman was beautiful, but wore a lot of makeup, and her hair looked unnatural. Hermione had never seen anyone like her.

The muggle looked her over with a sly grin.

"And who are you?"

"I'm a Nott ward."

"Ward?" The woman's brow creased. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen," she said.

The woman looked her over again, no longer looking concerned.


"Such a pretty little thing. Aren't you just a *doll*." The woman gave a loud laugh that grated along her skin. She hated the rotating women that entered and left the house, but something was off about this one.

"Titus is in his study."

"Oh, I know." She gave a flippant wave as she walked out. "This is not the first time I've been here."

Another oddity: Titus rarely had the same woman over twice.

Art by [lvmaruva](#)

hermione

## Chapter End Notes

A/N: The wildfire whiz-bangs were taken from canon, but I did change it a little for this universe, much like I did for other things, including the purse.

# Chapter 14: Truth or Dare

## Chapter Notes

Song suggestion: Jynjo- "How do you Like it" (ft. Spritely)

My beta, MyPrivateInsanity, is the best! Without her, I would not have been able to finish editing this within the week.

### Truth or Dare

"You can't ignore me forever." Titus sat in the quidditch stands next to Hermione while waiting for Theo's game to begin. The other parents and students kept a wide berth from them, probably sensing the tension.

She decidedly *could* ignore him.

Hermione pulled her cloak tighter, attempting to block out the icy wind. High in the stands, it felt unrelenting, despite warming charms. It was a miserable day, and if it wasn't for the anticipation of what may come later with Draco, she'd have preferred to stay at home, *inside*, like any reasonable person.

Hermione stared at Draco as he did flips and rolls in the air, practising catching the snitch. Her eyes couldn't tear away from the long, lean lines of his body. A sharp desire shot through her, remembering how it felt as his rough hands slid up her thighs.

Today, the Slytherins faced off against the Ravenclaws—the last game before the winter holiday. The Slytherins weren't supposed to have a game so close to the last one, but the schedules had been rearranged. Hermione suspected the Malfoys had a hand behind that.

"It's been days since you've talked to me, Sprite." Titus turned his face to look at her. "I'm not angry anymore, and I miss you." He tried to grab her hand, but she tugged away, not wishing to be soothed by him. He flexed his hand in agitation. "Look, I know why you stole the books. It must seem unfair to be denied knowledge, especially to someone that loves it like you do. Just—try to see it from my perspective." Titus touched the strap of her purse. She wore it today on purpose to see if he'd take it away. Nothing was in it but a few approved books and some snacks. "It really is a clever bit of magic. I wasn't lying when I said I was impressed."

When she still didn't respond, he made a noise of frustration and turned forward.

She waited until the anger forced her to speak.

"You yelled at me," she decided to say.

Titus didn't respond for a moment, as if trying to structure his thoughts.

"Are you really angry at that, or are you angrier I took away the books?"

"Both. I'm excellent at multitasking."

Titus sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, as if to massage out some tension.

"I won't apologise for taking back stolen books, but I shouldn't have yelled at you, even if I was angry." He touched her hand, gently threading their fingers together. This time she didn't have the strength to tug it away. She really didn't even have the strength to stay mad. It was hard ignoring such an important person in her life. "I know my yelling scared you, and the thought of you ever being scared of me makes me feel terrible."

Hermione took a deep breath.

"After the game, can I explore the castle with Theo?"

Titus searched her face as if to find the trick.

"If I let you, will you forgive me?"

"I don't know."

"Please, Sprite," he said. "I don't like you looking at me like that, as if— I'd never hurt you. You know that, right?"

The whistle blew, signalling the start of the game.

"Fine," she said. "If you let me explore the castle with Theo for as long as I'd like—without hovering over us—I'll attempt to forgive you." She might as well get what she wanted, since she'd probably forgive him soon anyway. Keeping her anger burning took a lot of energy, and she didn't know how much longer she could hold it without caving in, especially with the gentle way he held her hand, keeping it warm from the icy wind.

He leaned over and brushed a kiss to her cheek, leaving the scent of cinnamon behind.

"Deal. I'll take you shopping tomorrow too. I've already taken off work to spend the day with you."

---

Theo brought her to the astronomy tower again.

"I really don't know what Malfoy planned," Theo said when she tried to get information out of him. "All I know is he stole Harry's invisibility cloak this time. Maybe you could get that back like you did the map. It's his father's, you see, and a family heirloom. He'd get in massive trouble if he lost it."

"Of course," Hermione said. "But Harry needs to start being more mindful of his things around Draco."



Theo dug around in his pocket and took out the map he referenced.

"Harry let me borrow this," he said, blushing when she raised her eyebrow at him. "I needed something to make sure Titus doesn't find me here alone. I'd be flayed alive."

She gave him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Have fun," he said. "Make sure you put him in his place a time or two."

"You don't need to worry about that." Hermione flicked her hair off her shoulder. "It's my speciality."

She climbed the rickety stairs to the astronomy tower, even as her stomach swooped in protest against the idea of being so far above the ground - much higher than the treehouse.

Draco waited for her at the top, giving a wicked grin that made her stomach flutter. He had a book bag over his shoulder and held a broom in one hand and a cloak in the other—Harry's cloak.

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise."

Hermione didn't like surprises. She liked to anticipate things. The unknown annoyed her. She glared at the broom in his hand, not liking the conclusions she jumped to.

"I'm not sure you know this, but I *don't* participate in broom travel."

"Oh, I know that," he said with a nod. "Unfortunately, there's no other way to get there." He held out the cloak. "Here, put this on."

She grabbed it, liking the feeling of the fabric under her fingers, and wrapped it around her on top of her other cloak, flicking the hood up, only letting her face peek through.

"Wicked!" Hermione looked down to find her body had vanished. "This is a much better cloak than the one Titus has. I wonder how it's lasted this long. Invisibility cloaks rarely survive more than a few years. It's an heirloom of Harry's, correct?"

Draco hesitated, as if wondering what her reaction to it would be.

"Correct," he finally said. "I'm afraid you won't be able to take this one out from under my nose. I wanted to spank you when I discovered your last little trick with the map, and I'm not sure I could control the urge a second time."

A blush raced across her cheeks at the thought of being bent over Draco's knee, his hand coming down on her arse. In all her different fantasies, she'd never thought of that before.

"We'll see," she said.

"Now that introductions are out of the way, hop on." He straddled the contraption, leaving enough room on the back for her.

"Not in a million years. You'll just have to create some other date."

He smiled. She smiled back. He smiled bigger. Then her smile died, knowing what he planned. But it was too late to avoid it.

He kicked off with a jolt and propelled forward, swooping her up and behind him. She barely had enough time to place her arms around his waist before he barreled into open air.

---

After four barrel rolls, three sharp dives, and two swift turns, Draco heeded her panicked cries.

"Put me down!" Hermione's voice was hoarse from screaming. Freezing wind whipped against her face.

Still metres from the ground, she jumped off the broom, braving a broken neck from the tumble rather than one more second in the air. She hit the ground hard, but after a moment of laboured breathing, she stood without any injuries.

"Are you insane?" Draco landed and jumped from his broom with grace, going straight into a walk.

When Draco reached her, he grabbed her by the shoulders and began to pat her down.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking for injuries, you silly bint." His hands ran down her arms, then down her waist, then slower down her legs. She held her breath the entire time.

"I'm fine." She stepped away from him.

Hermione examined the small circular glade they'd landed in. The thick trees of the Forbidden Forest surrounded her like menacing guards, and a line of black obsidian sat against the tree line—a protection against dark magic and nefarious intruders. She felt the hum of blood wards from here. Violets and Queen of the Nights sprung from the ground, opening their purple petals to the sky in an ancient worship of the sun. Hermione did the same, flinging back her arms and turning her face upward, taking a long drink of the surprising warmth. Life and magic buzzed around her.

"Where are we?"

"My great great grandfather created it," Draco answered, staring at her joy in an intense way. "He wanted a safe space for his heirs if Hogwarts ever fell during a war, but really it's only been used for— well, for things just like this."

Draco leaned back on his heels, then stood, shrugging off his outer robes. Warming charms must have been embedded in the wards, because it felt like a wonderful late spring day in the

middle of winter. She took off both the cloaks, finding it too hot.

Malfoy opened the bag and began rummaging through it, lifting out more items than it could reasonably hold, showing it must have a charm on it similar to her purse.

A blanket came out first, and then several pillows. From the colours, he'd probably pilfered them from the Slytherin common room. The food came next: fresh fruit, fried fish, butterbeer, rolls. And every assortment of dessert: chocolate frogs, dainty tea cakes, pumpkin pasties, cauldron cakes.

When he'd finished setting up, Draco sat down on the blanket and patted the spot next to him. She walked over, attempting to control her heart rate, which was rising the longer she spent in Draco's presence.

"You planned a picnic?" Hermione asked while sitting down, letting a smile peek through. "Is this what people normally do on dates?"

He stared at the smile she gave him and paused.

"I'm not sure, but I'm hungry."

The desire for talk vanished as they devoured the food, eating each dish with exultation. The longer she sat in the sun, the farther her guard came down.

If a person would have told her as a child that she'd be sitting in a secret glade with Draco Malfoy eating strawberries in compatible silence, she might have packed their bags and sent them to St. Mungo's Janus Thickey Ward. But here she was...

Draco started off on the other side of the blanket, food set between them, but by the end of the meal he was lying dangerously close to her lap, a book open in one hand and a struggling chocolate frog in the other. The light of the sun played beautifully off his pale features, and she tried not to notice the way his unfairly long eyelashes brushed his face with each blink, or that up close she could see almost translucent freckles scattered across his nose.

When he noticed her examination, he squinted up into the sun. He brought the strings down to save his place before closing his book. She appreciated how gently he handled books. Theo always saved his spot by leaving the book open, pages down, often tragically ruining the spine.

Draco grabbed her hand. The skin-to-skin contact felt like a jolt. On instinct, she almost tugged her hand away, but his hold was gentle, so she let him cradle it as he studied her palm. With his index finger, he traced the lines in contemplation and followed the one which curved down.

"You have a long lifeline."

Hermione hated divination and thought all of it to be hogwash. She couldn't quite read if Draco was being serious or not.

"I never took you for the type to believe in fate," she said.

"Of course I believe in fate. If you haven't figured it out yet, we're meant to be together. A million different lifetimes, and I think it would always be you and me."

How ridiculous.

"That makes it sound as if we love each other, which—I can assure you—we do not. I just barely tolerate you."

He scoffed.

"Of course we don't love each other. That will come with time. I doubt you can resist me for long."

He was so sure and confident. She wished to bring him back to reality.

"You have a third of a chance," she said. "That's fairly good odds, but I hardly believe we're fated."

He frowned, ignored her, and kept tracing. "You encompass great wisdom and knowledge." He squinted again. "So far nothing surprising. And see this one—" He showed her the line on top. It was deep and dark and long, as if a great scar on her palm, "With that heart line you could have been in Hufflepuff."

"I'm not sure if that was a compliment or an insult."

"An insult for sure."

"For your information, I'm entirely Gryffindor."

He gave an exaggerated grimace.

"That's worse."

She swatted his arm in mock outrage. In retaliation, he laughed and gripped her wrist - and in a single motion, flipped her onto her back so he was hovering over her. They both stopped, still as statues, sensing a change in the atmosphere. He'd straddled her waist, bent down enough that his mouth was next to her chin. His lips just barely brushed the skin, teasing, gentle, until he made his way to her lips. This felt different from the last time, slower, more serious. Like he could explore her skin all day and never feel sated.

It scared her. Hermione made a noise and jerked away. Draco stopped and looked down in confusion.

"Are you alright?"

"This is..."

Too much, too fast. She had planned for physical interactions: backs against stone walls, hands roaming, lips ravaging her in passion. Anything to do with real emotions was dangerous, because she refused to fall for someone she'd need to say goodbye to.

He wrinkled his brow, lips almost pulling into a sneer. He seemed to catch on to her thoughts, because he lifted away from her, leaving her oddly cold, even with the sunshine.

She'd hurt his feelings with her sudden rejection. Another surprise—Draco Malfoy had feelings that could be hurt.

He moved to the other side of the blanket, studying her. He wore the same type of piercing stare Titus did, as if he was trying to view into her mind and rip out her secrets.

Draco reached back into his bag, pulling out two tumblers and a bottle of firewhisky.

"Care for a drink?"

Hermione hesitated but nodded. She'd never tried alcohol, except for a glass of wine.

He poured the amber liquid into a glass and handed it to her. She sloshed it around for a second before downing it in one gulp. It burned through her, making her gag with the unpleasant taste.

"That's foul. How do people drink this stuff for fun?"

Draco raised one eyebrow.

"You might want to go slow. This is the good stuff. It comes from my own stores. If you're not careful you'll get—"

"Drunk? Isn't that the point?"

He tilted his head to the side, considering her. In answer, he tipped his own glass back and downed it.

"Sure, but I doubt Titus would be too happy if Theo returned you to him sloshed."

He was right. The stuff was potent. The fire already bloomed in her belly, travelling through her veins—just enough to feel relaxed.

"Well, you needn't worry." She gave a shiver of disgust. "I refuse to take another swallow of that poison. You can punish yourself with the rest."

"Fine with me. Not everyone can have a developed palate," Draco teased, and Hermione rolled her eyes. "Do you want to play a game?"

"Chess again?"

A smirk curled Draco's lips, and Hermione knew he was up to no good.

"I have a different game in mind."

"What?"

Draco fiddled with his wand, letting it twist through his fingers.

"Truth or dare."

"The children's game?"

"No, the adult one."

Wizarding truth or dare—the same game Theo was stupid enough to get entangled with. It was illegal for minors to play because the consequences were serious. She'd heard of a woman whose hair had fallen out permanently. But that was a minor consequence. Most of the time, cowardice and lying resulted in disfigurement, pain, or even death in rare cases. It wasn't something to just *play*.

"That doesn't sound fun at all."

"Scared?" He taunted. "I thought you just said you were a Gryffindor."

Why did he always make her feel mildly violent? He knew the right words to get her to play. It was manipulation, and she sighed, knowing he'd already won. She should absolutely *not* be playing truth or dare with Malfoy. He was far too clever and determined, already planning his next move and contingent move in advance.

"Alright."

"Then hold out your hand, so we can play this properly."

She hesitated but reached out. He gripped her wrist, turning it over, saying the truth or dare incantation, binding them into a contract until the game was finished. "We'll complete three rounds," Draco said, looking dangerous. "And the consequence for not complying with the rules is that you'll feel like you'll need to sneeze without being able to sneeze... for an entire month."

The magic sizzled into her skin, a warning. Afterwards, she tugged her hand back.

"That's quite possibly the most diabolical consequence I've ever heard," Hermione said, rubbing at her wrist.

"I can be creative when it comes to cruelty, so I'd advise you to answer my questions truthfully and comply with my dares," Draco said. "Now, go ahead, ask me first."

"Truth or dare?" Hermione asked.

"Truth."

Hermione paused, thinking.

"Why do you think we're fated? I mean, I'm flattered, but we've only had a few interactions in our life."

Draco's mouth twisted into tight lines. "Fuck, straight for my throat. I should have known you'd be ruthless." He gave a heavy sigh and stared at the trees, as if wondering how to say

what he wanted to articulate. Whatever it was, it needed to be the complete truth. Maybe he was already regretting playing it with her. "I was there the day my mother died. Did you know that?"

Hermione's heart dropped at what he referenced. She'd heard the story in bits and pieces over the years. Theo's parents had visited Malfoy Manor for a Beltane celebration. Titus had been busy with friends, and Theo had been sick. If not, they'd have both been there too.

Many of the guests had been in the main room, and her father somehow sent an explosive through the floor, bypassing the wards, something the purebloods thought impossible. It killed several purebloods, most of them women. The true war started that day—the moment when wizards realised the muggles could pose a threat.

"No," Hermione said, softly. "I didn't."

"Well, I'd been jumping off a chair, being naughty, despite my mother telling me to stop, when the device fell through. Everyone stared at it in confusion, but my mum knew something was wrong and threw up a Protego around me right before it exploded." He stopped his story for a moment, and she thought it might be to control the slight quiver in his voice. "Blood and body parts were everywhere. I—I saw—her body was mangled, but surprisingly, her face was untouched. I sat there and stared at her while wizards sifted through the chaos. At one point, I tried to grab her hand, but it—they were gone. Her arms, her legs, her lower body..." He frowned, his gaze empty, as if he was seeing it all again. "Nothing was left." He glanced back into the trees, lips pulling into a frown. "I stayed there until my father found me."

How horrid. Her stomach lurched. Hermione wished she'd asked a different question.

"I'm sorry," she said, but he wasn't done.

"When your father died, I saw you staring at his body, and—and I knew then that you might be the only person in the whole world that might understand. The moment seared into me. I'll never forget your expression. I—fuck, Granger—I hated my father for doing that to you, because I knew how it felt. It's a terrible void inside you that will never go away."

He was right about that.

"Theo would understand."

"No." Draco shook his head. "He lost his parents, which is atrocious, but—he didn't see it happen. Not like we did. Don't you understand? The violence bonded us. Your father killed my mum, and my father killed your dad. It should be unforgivable, but things were meant to be forgiven between us. A balance in the universe. My mother's death had to have meant something, and that something was fate leading me to you."

The logic was distorted, but she thought she understood. They were both broken creatures, damaged at a young age, clinging to anything that felt like hope. At least she'd had Theo to heal with. Draco had no one except Lucius. She couldn't imagine the loneliness paired with

the pain. Maybe that was why he'd been so adamant to be her friend, so focused on making a connection.

Maybe he didn't have any true friends at all.

Hermione didn't believe in fate, but she did believe in the ability to choose a destiny, and Draco had chosen her. The problem was, she didn't know if she should choose him.

"Is that the only reason?"

"Of course not. You also have magnificent tits."

She picked up a pillow and whacked him over the head with it. When she went to whack him a second time, he ripped it from her hands, giving a deep belly laugh.

"Oi, I meant a magnificent brain, Granger. No need to get violent."

His laughter felt contagious, dispelling the gravity of the situation. Before she could speak, the magic sizzled under her skin, signalling he told the whole truth, and it was his turn to ask her.

She sat back with apprehension.

"Truth or dare?" Draco asked.

Hermione decided to play it safe, wary of what he'd conjure up with a dare.

"Truth."

His grin was slow, one tooth at a time, as if he was hoping she'd say that.

"Do you find me attractive?"

Hermione withheld her annoyance, pursing her lips.

"Yes, you egotistical prat. What a waste of a question. Of course, you're attractive, you self-centered mandrake. You already knew that."

She threw another pillow at him, but she missed, much to his amusement.

"I just needed to make sure. I mean, I sort of guessed when you had your tongue in my mouth. It's just pleasant to hear."

Draco leaned back on his hands, having way too much fun with this.

"Truth or dare?" She asked, ire rising, unsure if she was having fun or not.

"Truth," he said.

She took a moment to think.



"Do you... do you find me attractive? I know you have some convoluted reason why we should be together, but you never mentioned if you *wanted* to be with me— in *that* way."

She'd never say it out loud, but a deep part of her wanted to find... something. Maybe love. Desire. Passion. One summer, she'd found an old romance novel that had been Theo's mother's, and she'd read it over and over, especially the part where they kissed and the boy confessed his undying love. The Trials already stole that hope from her. She understood the sacrifice now. She couldn't love a boy. Not until she knew who she'd be given to, and even then, she'd just have to hope they'd grow to care for each other. Hermione wasn't foolish enough to believe in happily ever after.

But she wanted it desperately.

Draco may just want her for a friend. Maybe he just wanted a muggleborn to breed. Or maybe he just wanted her because his father pushed her toward him.

Or—the most terrible conclusion— maybe he was lying to her about everything, only pursuing her for the status she'd bring him.

She needed to know the truth, so that she'd never doubt it.

"Am I attracted to you?" He asked, as if it was the most foolish question she'd ever asked. "Have you seen yourself? Does Titus forbid you mirrors? The Trials can go in the bin. Even without them, I'd make you mine." He leaned forward, looking serious. "Since the Yule ball, I haven't been able to think of anything else. My dreams are filled with you, imagining every part of your body. I can barely eat on the days I know you'll be close. If I could, I'd take you to my bed right now and show you exactly how attractive I think you are."

The magic sizzled, and Hermione knew without a shadow of a doubt that he wanted her despite circumstance. She attempted to control the way her hands trembled with the thought. How did people deal with this attraction? It made her want to disintegrate. Her heart beat in a dangerous fashion. It felt like flying, a terrible tumble of her stomach. It should be exhilarating, but it terrified her.

"Truth or dare?" He asked.

"Truth."

He pulled his bottom lip into his mouth and then slowly released it with a pop. After a moment, he tilted his head, and Hermione understood whatever he thought of would make her squirm.

"Have you ever masturbated to the thought of me?"

"Masturbate— what does that mean?"

"Let me rephrase." His grin almost turned evil. "Have you ever touched your cunt to the thought of me?"

She'd never heard it called a cunt, but she understood now what he'd asked.

Hermione's insides froze, everything inside her twisting. Her cheeks must match the Gryffindor colours.

The magic under the skin of her wrist zapped with each second that ticked by.

"Come on, Granger," Draco urged. "You need to answer before it starts to hurt."

It only took a few more warning zaps before she caved.

"Yes!" Hermione placed her head in her hands, unable to look at Draco in her mortification. When she finally regained her courage and looked at him, he wore a smug expression.

"More than once?" He asked.

"I don't have to answer another question."

"You're protesting too much, so I bet you have."

It had been far more than twice, but he'd need to rip that fact from her mind with legilimency before she'd *ever* tell him.

"Last round," Hermione said sharply, wanting to change the subject. "Truth or dare?"

"Dare."

That surprised her. He just gave her power over him. What did she want him to do? Honestly, she wanted him to be humiliated, just like she had been.

"Get naked," she said, and then amended. "Except your boxers."

"I'm not sure what you intended with this dare, but you're making this too easy. I'll undress for you anytime you want." He stood up and tugged off his shirt, revealing his pale chest. Though thin, his shoulders were broad with a trim waist, giving the impression he'd fill out in his shoulders like his handsome father. The muscles in his stomach and along his arms were defined, visible as he moved.

He was... breathtaking.

Hermione instantly knew she'd made a mistake with her dare. When Draco tugged at his trousers, pushing them down and discarding them, Hermione's mouth watered at the sight he presented. She'd meant to make him uncomfortable, but it only left her feverish.

"Now you have some new images to think of when you're rubbing one out." He winked while sitting down, carefree even while mostly naked.

Ugh, she wished she had more pillows to beat him with.

"Last one. Truth or dare, Granger?" He asked, giving a sideways smile.

Hermione feared any more questions from him. He'd already made her admit to masturbating to him, and she just knew the next one would be equally mortifying.

"Dare."

"I'd hoped you'd say that. After all, it's only fair." He gave a slow look up and down. "I dare you to keep all your clothes on... *except* your knickers. And then I want you to give them to me."

"Give them to you?" Hermione asked in shock.

The magic zapped her a few times while she stared at him dumbly before she complied with the demand. It *was* fair, she supposed, though she wasn't sure why he'd want her knickers.

Hermione stood up and then bent over a little to give herself some privacy, trying not to think about what she was doing. She hooked the edge of her knickers under her thumbs and tugged them down. Luckily, she'd worn a pretty pair today, red silk with lace trim.

When she pulled them off, she hesitated with handing them over, but the magic couldn't be denied, not unless she wanted to almost sneeze for a month.

Draco got up just enough to snag them. He stared at her knickers in his hand a moment, stroking his thumb over the place that had touched her cunt before throwing them near his trousers.

"You'll never see those again, I'm afraid."

Hermione sat down, making sure her dress thoroughly covered her bare private areas.

"What now?" She asked. "The game is over."

Draco got on his knees and started moving toward her. It took all her Gryffindor courage to stay in place.

"Now, I want to kiss you."

She wanted that too, but as he knelt before her, the same doubt entered her that stopped her from exploring the previous time. He was nearly naked, and she didn't have any knickers. They both knew this could lead to something they shouldn't be doing.

He gently grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to her knees, so she faced him. His hand cradled her jaw as he dragged his thumb along her lips.

There were no words as he leaned forward, eyes on her. Just the distant trill of birds and buzz of insects typical of a forest. The silence awoke the nerves along her skin as his lips skimmed against her mouth.

Hermione let her hands rest on his chest. He choked out a desperate sound at the contact, as if he'd been starved for touch, and his mouth finally pressed hard into hers.

Maybe he was starving for touch. She wondered how many times he'd had physical affection in his life with only Lucius in the household.

His skin resembled porcelain—so pale it looked cold— so she was surprised by the burning warmth under her fingertips. He shivered as she stroked and explored the tight muscles on his chest.

Both his hands traced down the silhouette of her curves through her dress, going further and further down, until his fingertips rested on the edge of her dress pooling against the blanket she kneeled on.

His fingers slipped under the hem and touched her knees, causing her breath to hitch.

She'd never been a person to be self-conscious, but she'd also never had a situation where she needed to be. His destination was clear, fingers dragging up achingly slow along her outer thigh. Besides herself, no one else had ever touched her there.

"I—I'm not sure."

He stopped instantly like the last time.

"You're overthinking this again," he said. "I can almost see that big brain of yours twisting. Feel my heart, Granger." As if he'd given her a dare, her right hand moved over, resting over his ribcage. The organ thumped furiously under her fingers, showing this made him as nervous and excited as it did to her. "You see," he said, eyes half-closed, concentrating on her lips with his mercury stare. "We're the same."

"How many times have you done this?"

His fingers still stayed in the same spot, as if waiting for the command to move.

"Never," he admitted.

She wondered if she believed him. But the tremble of his fingers on her thighs couldn't be faked— a scorching desire.

Why shouldn't she discover something new? And just like the kiss, even if she was abnormal, how would he know? The thought soothed her fears, and she felt ready to proceed.

"This is just experimenting," she reminded him.

He gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes. "Whatever you want to believe, Granger. We'll see what you think after I've learned what makes you cum."

She almost corrected him, but his fingers moved up again, distracting her. She began to pant as he reached her upper thigh and then her hips.

"Our bodies are made for this," he whispered, while edging to her center. Her whole body began to throb. Her core clenched as his fingers dipped down, finally reaching their destination, and she gave a soft whimper as he stroked. "Tell me exactly what you like."

He explored her gently. Much too gently, touching everywhere but where she wanted. After a few moments, it began to frustrate her. It occurred to her that if this was Draco's first time, maybe he didn't know what he was doing either. They'd need to teach each other everything.

She'd touched herself enough to know what she liked. What he was doing felt good, but it wasn't what was going to send her to bliss. She reached down and brought his thumb to her to the sensitive spot.

"Right here." She guided his finger in a firm circular motion. "Like this. It's where girls feel the most."

She thought he might get offended, but he nodded and brushed his thumb right where she asked, and her body rocked into the movement, chasing more.

Draco gave an audible groan at her reaction.

"That's your clit," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Blaise likes to sneak in muggle porn. Let's just say... I've studied it."

She didn't know what porn was, but when he circled her clit again, she stopped caring.

"More," she said, breathless.

"More what?"

"I'm not sure."

"I think I have an idea."

His finger slid down along her slit, embarrassingly wet, and then slowly dipped inside her.

"Oh, fuck," she said, feeling surprised. Her nails clenched into his bare skin, as he pushed it all the way inside her.

"You feel perfect."

She separated her legs on instinct, allowing him easier access. He went deeper than she expected. Before she could analyse it further, he slid in a second finger. It stretched her, almost feeling painful. She'd tried something similar one time with her own fingers, but she'd never gotten deep or tight like this. She whimpered against his lips, her nerves on fire from the sudden jolt of satisfaction.

"My clit," she begged. His thumb went back to what he'd been doing while he slowly pushed in and out. And then the palm of his hand rubbed against her, and she cried out.

"Just like that. Don't change *anything*." He studied her expressions as he moved, as if testing what would make her moan or buck her hips. Like he was strategizing how to conquer her

body. He learned fast, following her instructions, both verbal and nonverbal, on what felt good.

And oh, did it feel good. Better than she thought it would. She lost her inhibitions as his fingers explored. An intense curiosity overcame her.

"Can I see it?" She begged.

"See what?"

"Yours."

"My cock?"

Was that what it was called? She nodded her head.

He grinned and shoved down the fabric just enough to pull it out. It stood erect, long and hard, with a slight curve and thicker than she thought it would be—though she'd had nothing to compare it to. It seemed large to her, but it could be below average for all she knew. She examined it in a lust-filled haze and let her curiosity guide her.

"Can I touch it?"

He glanced up to the clouds, as if praying to a deity.

"Can you touch it?" He scoffed. "I've thought of nothing else for years. *Experiment* as much as you want, and you don't have to be gentle."

She did what she wanted, letting her hand trail down the length. Draco kept taking jerky, sharp breaths, the muscles in his stomach bunching. When she wrapped her hand around it, he tilted his head to the sky again. "Bloody hell."

The knowledge that *she* was causing this reaction—*Draco Malfoy* unravelling under her touch—made her feel powerful.

"Up and down," he hissed between clenched teeth. "Like this." He wrapped his free hand around hers, showing her what he liked.

She tried what he said, practising different speeds and grips as he pushed his hips forward, grunting and mumbling curses.

He began to move his fingers inside her again, and she didn't even try to withhold her moan, urging him on. In tandem, they pleased each other.

"The sounds you're making—" Draco's voice deepened. "They'll be my downfall. You've ruined me."

His free hand wrapped around her back, pressing them tight together, keeping her upright, giving just enough room to continue exploring each others' bodies.

The words, paired with him playing with her clit just right, fingers filling her, caused a sudden orgasm to crash over her—much stronger than she'd ever experienced by herself. He swallowed her satisfied moan with his lips, eyes open, as if in wonder, as if he couldn't believe what he'd just done. After the wave crashed and ebbed, she wished to sink to the ground in exhaustion, but she wanted to see him finish too. She tugged on him again, like he'd taught her.

"I'm getting close," he said through clenched teeth. "It won't take much." It sounded like he was on the edge of pain, but she knew from experience it was just the precipice to pleasure. He slid his fingers out of her and placed them next to his lips.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Tasting you." He licked his fingers and groaned, closing his eyes as if savouring it. Leaning his head forward to rest against her shoulder blade, his mouth pressed to her neck as he kept praising her. "Just like that," he said. "I knew you'd be so good at this. Such a fucking swot. Always want to be the best."

Though she fought the label, she *was* a bit of a swot, always seeking praise from her tutors. Nothing made her more content. The praise Draco gave made desire spike through her again.

"I'm cumming," he warned, and gave a single violent jerk of his hips forward. Something came out from the head of his cock. The white substance landed on her dress, and she let go in surprise. She stared at it while he collected himself. Draco was panting. Red splotches decorated his chest, checks, and neck from both her touch and his arousal.

"Fuck, Granger, that was the best—"

"What is this?" Hermione asked. Ever the curious person, she dipped a finger in the product of his release and brought it up to look.

"It's cum," he said, looking disoriented, hands still trembling.

She assumed it was the stuff Katie had mentioned that made babies. Though, she didn't expect so much of it.

Hermione wasn't sure why she did it. Maybe it was the thought of Draco sucking on his fingers after they'd been inside her. He seemed to enjoy it, so she brought her finger to her mouth and touched her tongue to the cum. It tasted salty and a little strange, and she didn't know if she liked it or not. Still, she placed the finger in her mouth and sucked.

"That was so excruciatingly hot." He was panting harder, as if on the edge of control. "I promise you— by the end of the school year, I'll win the Trials, and it will be my cock instead of my fingers. You'll be mine."

"I think *not*."

He wrinkled his brow, and his whole body stilled, as if reentering reality.

"What the fuck do you mean?" His voice lowered.

"Titus is letting me wait until I'm twenty-one."

"Don't you want to come live with me? I thought— after graduation I'll be gifted the manor. My father said he'd move to another property to give us privacy."

Hermione huffed out a breath.

Of course, his father would give them privacy, but it wasn't out of goodwill. He wanted little Malfoy heirs.

Hermione hated that she wished to fall into something more than pleasure. Hated he was so fucking confident with a future filled with uncertainty. Emotion was a luxury she couldn't afford.

"Malfoy... you might not win. I'm saying this seriously."

He sneered, as if hating her refusal to believe he'd win, just as much as she hated his belief. He grabbed her face in a firm hold, pressing his fingers into her cheeks.

"You're going to be mine," he said, voice hard. "I'm not going to accept anything else."

"Well, you'll just have to wait, because I'm *not* doing the Trials yet."

"And why the fuck not?"

"I don't want a baby!"

The hand on her cheeks loosened, and he let her go.

She snapped her lips shut after, knowing that what she said was against all societal norms. She *should* want a baby, but she didn't.

Drac stared at her and then gave a single sharp laugh.

"Thank fuck! I don't want one either."

"Really?" Hermione asked in confusion. "But you want me to go through the Trials?"

"So I can be *with* you. Not so I can knock you up with a snotty-nosed, screaming child."

"That makes no sense. If we have sex, I'd get pregnant."

Draco scoffed in amusement.

"Not if we use contraceptives."

"Contraceptives?" Hermione asked. "What are those?"

The clearing turned silent as Draco seemed to process her question.



"They really do keep you sheltered." Draco shook his head. "Contraceptives prevent pregnancy. Granted they're illegal, but it's a hard law to enforce, and I don't like being told what to do in the first place."

Hermione's whole world shifted on its axis. She'd always equated sex with babies. No one ever told her differently. It was her divine purpose to help populate the wizarding world, a noble thing. She'd always felt bad for wishing for a different path in her life. As much as she desired sex and fantasized about it while lying in her sheets, she also feared it for its consequences.

She shuddered out a breath, feeling lighter than she had in a while. Draco just gave her an unexpected gift. Sex without pregnancy. Pleasure without pain.

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course."

"But wouldn't the officials suspect something if I'm not pregnant after a year? I thought they investigated that stuff, and I doubt your father would be okay with it."

Draco paused, as if he hadn't thought of that. He stood up, *accioing* his clothes over.

"You're right." He sounded disappointed but resigned as he pulled on his trousers. "They'd investigate. As much as I hate waiting, starting the Trials when we're older might be a better option. Besides, there're plenty of things we can *experiment* with that won't result in pregnancy." He winked and reached down a hand and tugged her up, cleaning her dress of all evidence.

"That might be difficult if we're unable to see each other after Hogwarts. Theo only has one game left." She watched as Draco packed the picnic back into his bag.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "I'll figure out something."

---

They landed back on the Hogwarts astronomy tower. Compared to the last flight, this time he eschewed tricks, placing her in front of him and allowing his arm to circle around her waist, pressing them tight together while going at a slow pace. She laid her head on his shoulder, surrounded by the invisibility cloak.

He pulled to a gentle stop when they entered the room, holding her waist while they dismounted. She took off Harry's cloak and held it in her hands.

"Am I going to have to steal this too? Or will you do the right thing and give it back to Harry?"

"Being nice to Potter on purpose? I wouldn't hold your breath."

He talked a lot, but she held the cards.

"If you don't give it back, I'd be... angry."

"I like you angry. It makes me want to change your mind with my tongue." He looked at the way she propped a hand on her hip and gave an amused snort. "Fine, I'll give it back, but only so I can kiss you goodbye without any self-righteous rants."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but he tugged her into a fierce kiss, more aggressive than any he'd ever given her before. She didn't want to leave his embrace, wishing she could choose to do what she wanted. A sudden resentment toward Titus' rules bubbled up in her.

"What the fuck?" a male voice echoed around the tower.

They vaulted apart. Blaise Zabini stared at them with wide eyes, mouth open in shock, head peeking over the stairs.

"Zabini..." Draco warned in a low voice. "What are you doing up here?"

"Nott was being a shifty fucker, so I decided to investigate. I think the better question is what are *you* doing? Kissing a mudblood, and all alone. Titus Nott's house pet, at that! Now I understand why Nott tried to stop me. You've got some solid brass balls, Malfoy."

Draco took a threatening step toward him, fists clenched.

"If you dare say a single word to Titus, I'll make sure you never say another one again. Am I clear? Same for if you call her mudblood or house pet in my presence."

"You're starting to sound like a blood traitor."

A slash and flick of Draco's wand and Zabini lifted and slammed hard against a pole, sticking to it. Hermione flinched in surprise at the sudden violence. Malfoy stomped forward, placing his wand between the other boy's eyes.

"And you're starting to sound like a dead man. You think I wouldn't get away with murdering you? You're just an inconsequential fuckup with a whore for a mother. No one would care."

Hermione expected to see some reaction to the insults Draco just threw at him, and he must be in terrible pain from the hard throw of his body, but Zabini only gave a sly grin, like a spider watching its prey.

"You may get out of going to Azkaban, but they'd look into my death." He leaned over and spit out some blood. It coated his teeth with a crimson stain. She wondered if he'd bitten his tongue when he struck the pole. "It would be a shame if Titus discovered you feeling up his beloved pet. I'm not sure you'd survive the Butcher's anger— though there is another way. What will you give me for my silence?"

Draco transferred his wand to Zabini's throat and pressed hard.

"The ability to live another day. And if you believe I'm exaggerating, you might as well crawl into a grave and wait for me to finish the job. You can be a test subject for all of the dark spells in our family grimoire I've been learning. Or... maybe I should just let my father handle it. Why even bother getting my hands dirty when I can offload the task to someone else? I think he'd have fun with my request, especially when I tell him how you just

threatened to undermine all his careful plans." She'd never heard Draco like this—violent, deadly, calm. She wondered if this was the version of himself he showed everyone else.

At the mention of his father, a flash of fear crossed Zabini's face.

"I was kidding," Blaise said, though he still grinned in an irritating way. "I'm not going to say a word. You know me."

"Yes, I fucking *know you*," Draco said. "So you don't fool me. Go on, Granger. Don't worry about Blaise." He still pointed his wand at Zabini, keeping him pinned to the pole. "I'll make sure he stays quiet, because he won't live long if he doesn't."

Hermione wished to tell Draco how much today meant to her. She'd never had so much fun. But instead, she walked down the astronomy tower stairs with shaky legs. Just like with the wands, Hermione had a horrible realisation of the consequences if she were caught. She'd treated their dates like a fun game, an exciting thrill, but it could crash down around her.

Remembering the way Titus backed her into the wall, hand gripping her shoulder, training furious, intelligent eyes on her, she no longer knew what he'd do if he discovered she not only kissed Draco Malfoy, but allowed his fingers inside her.

# Chapter 15: The Gift of the Universe

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Crossfade- "Colors"

To answer a common question: the age difference between Titus and Hermione is nine years. He's twenty-seven right now.

All the kudos to my BAMF beta, MyPrivateInsanity!

### The Gift of the Universe

Christmas break arrived, and Hermione ran to greet Theo just as he got off the Hogwarts Express. He wrapped his arms tight around her, lifting her in the air and twirling her.

"You're finally taller than me," she teased. He must have grown by four inches at least, making him long and skinny. "It's not much of an accomplishment, but congratulations."

Theo rolled his eyes at her teasing and set her down.

"You and Malfoy have the exact same sense of humour. Maybe that's why he likes you. There's finally someone mean enough for him."

"Of course, he likes me." Hermione gave a little flip of her hair. "Why shouldn't he?"

Titus, still much taller than his younger brother, stepped up behind Theo and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm glad you're going to be home."

Theo stiffened. A strange, dark look crossed his features.

"Don't talk to me."

He shoved off his brother's hand and walked away.

Titus pulled back in confusion. He watched him until Theo walked far enough away, and then he turned his attention to Hermione.

"What was that about?"

Hermione shrugged, but worry grew in her heart. She'd never seen Theo act so angry, especially toward his brother.

---

They exited the train station in tense silence until they got to the muggle automobile they rented for the trip. Hermione refused to fly, and apparition and floo were restricted around the train stations, so it had always been tradition to drive to and from the nearest authorised floo. Though Titus hated most muggle items, he did seem to enjoy driving their automobiles. Normally, he sped through the city streets, grinning as he wove recklessly through traffic, almost making Hermione wish for a broom ride.

This time he drove at a slower speed. His concern was obvious as he kept glancing in the rearview mirror at his brother in the back glowered beside her. Usually, they spent their time telling stories and jokes and catching up on what they missed while apart from each other, but all of his good cheer at initially seeing her had faded into a seething anger.

"Let's just apparate now that we're far enough away from the station," Theo said. "I don't want to be around you."

"Don't talk to me like that," Titus snapped.

"If I continue, would you curse me?"

"Of course not. Why are you acting like this?"

"Oh, I think you know *exactly* why I'm acting like this."

Hermione didn't like apparition with its unpleasant pop, feeling as if she'd been ground up and put back together. She preferred floo, if possible, which is why Titus started the habit of driving. They all enjoyed the tradition normally, and Hermione especially enjoyed the brief glance into muggle London, so for Theo to want to deny her that meant something was very wrong.

Hermione reached out and touched Theo's arm. He flinched at the contact.

"Can you tell me what's wrong?"

He gave a loud, mocking laugh. It sounded odd coming out of his mouth. She'd never seen him in such a bad mood.

"Wouldn't that be a shock for you?" His face softened just a tad. "You don't know who Titus even is. The Butch—"

Titus slammed on the brakes, making them tumble forward into the seat in front of them.

"Theo... I've never laid a hand on you, but if one more word exits your mouth, I'll thrash you."

Hermione paused in shock, wondering what to do. She'd never heard them argue like this, with physical threats.

A few cars honked their horns behind them, but Titus ignored them.

Hermione looked between the two, each glaring as if they might stab one another. Finally, Theo jerked away and pushed open the door, climbing out and slamming it hard behind him. He paced on the side of the street and then, as if he'd just remembered that he was seventeen and could apparate by himself, he lifted his wand and disappeared.

"Are you alright, Hermione?" Titus asked in concern. "I stopped harder than I intended."

"I'm fine. Why is he angry?"

Titus sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't know."

But he refused to meet her eyes.

---

Titus took the long way. His hands gripped the steering wheel so hard the veins in his hands and arms raised. They followed the meandering roads in silence, Titus' lips pressed tightly together. Hermione kept her eyes on him, curious about his reaction.

She didn't ask him about the situation again. Not with the ugly mood he displayed.

When he finally stopped their car at the floo location, Titus walked around, opened the door, and helped Hermione out.

"Theo will come around," she said. "Whatever he's upset about doesn't change the fact you're his brother, and he loves you."

He let out a long sigh, releasing some of the tension in his body.

"I hope you're right." He clenched his teeth a moment and glanced away. "I have an idea of what's wrong, and—sometimes my job requires me to make hard decisions, and they aren't for the soft-hearted. Nothing I do is out of cruelty but necessity."

"You don't have to convince me you aren't cruel, Titus."

In response, he gave a small nod, though he still refused to look her in the eye. He ran a stressed hand through his hair, making it stick up a little.

"Alright, it's time to get home. Maybe Theo's cooled off a little."

---

Theo had not cooled off. In fact, he refused to cool off for days, unwilling to tell Hermione the issue.

"Titus won't allow me to discuss it without him present." He said the last part with undisguised resentment.

Hermione felt like she was in the middle of a war. Titus, silent and brooding. Theo, angry and short-tempered. Neither of them were pleasant company, so she spent her days attempting to help Bitty do chores, much to the little elf's distress. Hermione stopped after she folded her own clothes, almost causing Bitty to iron her fingers.

By the time Christmas Eve arrived, Hermione reached the end of her mental rope. Dinner was a silent battle, the two Notts glaring at each other across the table, the only sounds the clink of glasses and cutlery. Finally, Hermione slammed her fork down so hard Titus popped briefly out of his concentrated fury.

"Alright, enough of this," she said. "Either you two go outside and fight it out physically—which, if you do, go easy on him, Titus—or someone is going to tell me what's going on, because I refuse to tiptoe around either of you."

She looked over at Theo. To her surprise, his eyes looked a little red, as if he might cry.

"Will you tell her, or should I?"

"Theo—" Titus whispered.

"Titus killed Harry's father."

Hermione gasped and dropped the glass of water she'd been holding. It rolled across the table and clattered to the floor. The spilled water steadily dripped off the table's edge as Hermione stared at Titus in shock. A flash of panic crossed his face at her inspection.

"He was in the Order, Hermione. I had—"

"There was no proof of that!" Theo shouted, standing up with a screech of his chair.

"There was enough circumstantial evidence, including recent correspondence with Sirius Black," Titus said. "And he tried to kill me!"

"No, he tried to kill Snape, because he's an evil arse."

"You weren't there. He attempted to fucking Avada me," Titus said in a low voice. "And that's Headmaster Snape to you. I don't care if you loathe him, you'll show him proper respect."

"No, it's *Snape*," Theo spat the name. "Nothing but a snivelling little reject. Mr. Potter only fought because Snape threatened to take his wife. Any normal bloke would do the same. What would you do if someone marched in here and tried to take Hermione?"

Titus scowled as if just the thought made him violent.

"That's different. It would be within my rights to eviscerate any man who dared try to touch her. But James interfered with an investigation and attacked an auror—"

"James—" Hermione interrupted, trying to place the name. "*James* Potter?" All the pieces clicked together, remembering Snape's discussion with Titus at the quidditch match. The conversation revealed its dark undertones. Hermione's eyes widened in realisation.

She bit her tongue, wondering what to say. The clock ticked in the background as they stared at each other in tense silence.

"What's going to happen to Harry?" She asked. The words felt like lead.

Theo made a distressed noise at the question, but he quickly swallowed any other reaction.

"Tell her, Titus."

Titus clenched his teeth in what must be frustration or anger. Maybe a suppressed guilt.

"His mother will be going to live with Severus as his breeder. All three children will relocate with her."

Hermione didn't stop her horrified gasp.

"Couldn't she have gone to someone else?"

"Because of her age, only Snape put in for her. Or maybe no one did because it was Snape in the running. He's a formidable wizard." Titus shrugged. "We tried to convince him to compete for a younger one, but he insisted on caring for Lily."

*Caring for Lily.* What a fucking lie.

"And Harry?" Hermione asked, voice now almost a whisper. Any louder and something inside her would snap.

"He—"

"Snape tried to send him to live with his horrid muggle aunt and uncle," Theo cut in.

"That's distorting the truth." Titus turned his attention to Hermione. "Harry attempted to curse Severus at Hogwarts, and the headmaster thought it prudent to control him with threats so the dumb boy wouldn't get himself arrested, hurt, or killed. He saved his life. Snape loves Lily, Theo. He wouldn't do anything to her son."

Hermione didn't believe him. She remembered Snape's words now, about Lily's oldest son. He'd complained the boy was too much like his father. If he got a chance to get rid of Harry, he might take it.

She did know one thing: what Snape did to Lily was pain, not love.

Theo picked up his plate, still filled with food, and flung it across the table. It missed his target completely, but the intent was clear. Theo's chest rose and fell at a rapid rate, and his glasses slid down his nose.



"That's a fucking lie!" He roared. "Snape's always hated Harry, and now he has to live with the man responsible for the death of his father, because of *you*."

"James Potter is responsible for his own death."

Theo pointed his wand at his brother in a rage.

"I wouldn't do that, Theo. You can't win against me."

"Maybe I want you to curse me, so you'll finally show Hermione exactly who you are."

Titus' upper lip curled, and he reached in his pocket and set his curved wand next to his spoon on the table.

"Stop being foolish. Why are you even friends with a blood traitor's son?" Titus asked in a cruel voice she'd never heard.

"Because—" Theo's arms shook. Tears slipped free from his eyes, sliding past his glasses. "Because he's my only—and now he won't want to be anymore. Not after you murdered his father, and I don't blame him. Why would anyone want to be my friend after this?"

"Theo—"

"I hate you."

"You don't mean—"

"I mean everything."

"Don't you dare walk—"

"I can't wait to leave the manor, so I never have to see you ever again. You're not my brother anymore."

Titus reared back as if he'd been stuck.

Silence.

Theo gave one last shiver of fury and then turned and stalked out of the room. Hermione watched as Titus sucked in a pained breath and blinked rapidly. Theo wounded him in a deep way, but maybe he deserved it - though Theo shouldn't have said the last bit, even in anger.

Everything inside Hermione revolted at the thoughts inside her. She couldn't imagine being in Lily's place. Because it wasn't just living with him. Titus downplayed the horror. By ministry order, a muggleborn and her wizard must attempt to produce children. She'd need to enter the bed of the man who orchestrated her husband's murder, and no matter what Titus said, it had been planned by Snape. He'd probably taunted James on purpose, knowing the outcome.

"And you?" Titus asked, talking through his teeth. "Do you hate me too today? Go on and speak. I can tell you want to. Don't hold back. You might as well say it all."

Hermione ignored the hateful tone, counting her breaths so she didn't say something she didn't mean.

"Harry was one of Theo's only friends," she attempted to explain.

Titus focused on the opposite wall. He grabbed his wand and repocketed it.

"It's not like I meant to kill James," he bit out. "We found the letters, so we had to investigate. I didn't have a choice, and then Snape showed up unannounced and, in a panic, James tried to curse me. Would you rather I'd died?" He took a deep breath, flaring his nostrils. "Snape meant for him to get arrested, not— It doesn't matter. I can't change what happened. Besides, Theo should be spending more time with wizards with good connections anyway. Maybe this will help him step out of his bubble a little."

Hermione reached down and gripped her fork to give her an anchor to hold onto, so she didn't attempt to stab him.

"That's not how friendship works."

Titus' eyes snapped to hers, narrowing in a sharp anger. The look chilled her as it locked onto her face.

"How would you know?" He hissed with a snarl. "You're judging me for something you don't even understand. You know nothing about real life, Hermione, *absolutely nothing*, and you never will. Why am I even asking your opinion? You've barely even been outside of this manor. I've given you a lot of freedom—more than any other muggleborn I know—but maybe it's time you start learning your place. You can focus on your books and daydreams and stay the *fuck* out of my business."

As soon as he was done speaking, he lost his snarl. The ticking clock grew louder in the sudden silence. She felt slapped, as if something was jolted inside her, landing her in a new reality.

"Is that what you really think of me?" She stood up, straightening her skirt. "Tell me—what exactly is my place in this household? I thought it was a position of respect, a position of value. The auror that tried to kidnap me was convinced you see me as a pet. I refused to believe it, but maybe he had a point."

Titus stood up too, eyes widening.

"Sprite—"

"Don't call me that. If I'm nothing but a *house pet*, then don't pretend I'm anything more."

She began walking away, unwilling to stay a second longer in his presence.

Titus chased after her.

"Stop," he demanded.

She paused her furious exit.

"As my *master* commands."

She'd never called him "master" in her life. She didn't need to look at Titus to know he flinched at the term.

"Don't say—I didn't mean it." He touched the small of her back, chest nearly pressed against her, breath tickling her neck. She trembled in repressed rage. "Please, look at me. You're not a pet. You're my—of course, I value—"

"Yes."

"What do you mean, yes?"

"The answer to your question," she spat. "I think I *do* hate you today."

His hand fell from her as she walked out of the room, unwilling to look back.

When she got far enough away, she heard a loud crash as Titus swept the dinner service off the table.

---

Hermione woke on Christmas morning to a knock on her door. She hesitated, already knowing who it was, but she untangled herself from the sheets and padded over to the door. The cold floor chilled her feet, and she crossed her arms. Despite warming charms, Nott manor was always a bit draughty in the winter.

She opened the door to find Titus staring at her, looking sheepish. Hermione crossed her arms, already on the defensive.

He looked ridiculously handsome in pyjama bottoms and a black undershirt, his dark hair dishevelled from sleep. The sharp angles of his jaw had shadows of dark scruff, and his blue eyes shone bright with hope.

"Theo's refusing to open presents. I just—it's Christmas, Sprite. You can hate me tomorrow, but can we have a cease fire this morning?"

Hermione tapped her fingers in a distracted rhythm against her arm.

The thought of Titus killing James Potter made her stomach turn. However, if Mr. Potter cast the first Avada, how could she fault Titus for defending himself? She hurt for Theo and for Harry, but the loss didn't affect her personally. It was too complicated to sort through.

Her real anger stemmed from his cruel words. What he told her the night before still stung.

*Maybe it's time you start learning your place.*

Since she'd arrived at Nott manor, she'd never been spoken to like that. She'd always thought it was because Titus never would, but maybe it was because she'd never contradicted him.

Not in the serious way she had in defence of Theo.

But, in the end, she didn't want to poison the day with her anger. "Alright," she agreed. "*Only* for Christmas. You'll have to work much harder for my forgiveness this time."

His broad shoulders sagged in relief.

---

Hermione followed him to the front sitting room, where they usually set up a tree. Titus once told her muggles associated the day with their mythical God. The old wizarding families called the day Christmas, but the celebration was connected to Yuletide.

Every year they found a giant tree, reaching to the top of the vaulted ceiling, and decorated it with floating candles and glass ornaments enchanted to show different moving pictures of the Nott family. A new glass ball was added every Christmas, showing the highlights of the year. By this point, she was on several, waving and smiling through the fragile orbs. Her first Christmas at the manor, they had several *real* fairies pinned to the branches—a traditional wizard decoration. But Titus stopped the inhumane custom when she told him it upset her. They'd since replaced them with transfigured replicas.

When she entered the sitting room, magic snow floated down. It vanished as it landed. Bitty did not disappoint with the decorations, hanging icicles in the windows and covering everything with tinsel and shimmer charms.

Titus led her to the tree where he had already organised the presents into piles, ready to be torn into, but she knew Theo's would stay wrapped. At least for now.

"Go on," he said.

She began opening, finding a new perfume from Tabitha and a few new books she'd wanted from Theo, along with an embellished quill he'd made. Titus got her a lovely floor length red cloak.

"Thank you," she said after finishing.

He gave a crooked grin, showing one of his dimples.

"I have one more."

He passed her a small box with a blue bow on top. She looked at it in confusion and then gently unravelled it.

When she opened the velvet box, she gasped. Inside was a beautiful crystal necklace in the shape of a teardrop on a thick black ribbon. It seemed delicate, but she knew it was much sturdier than it looked.

"It's goblin-made," Titus explained. He walked over and helped her clasp it on her neck. It fit snugly around her throat. His calloused fingers brushed against the hair on the back of her neck as he pulled away.

Goblin-made jewellery always held surprise enchantments.

"What does it do?"

He flicked up his wand and the curtains closed, darkening the room. He reached out and tapped the crystal with his hand, and the whole room lit up.

The universe rotated around her. A replica of the moon hovered near her head, and the planets twisted around the glowing sun.

"Wow," Hermione said in awe, realising it wasn't an image, but tangible. She touched a bright star, and then an even smaller distant galaxy. It rested in her hands like a captured firefly. She walked over and spun Venus on the tip of her finger and then traced Cassiopeia, connecting the dots. The solid shapes felt cool under her hands, and they were light as a feather.

Titus watched her amazement with a gentle smile on his face. The shadows of stars crossed his face.

"This is amazing," she said truthfully. Goblin-made jewellery was both expensive and rare. He must have paid a bagful of galleons for it—maybe more than even the first edition of *Hogwarts: A History*. "Why did you spend so much on me?"

"Didn't I say I'd give you the universe?"

Her heart began pounding under her ribs. The intense way he looked at her was making her a little uncomfortable, and she wasn't sure if she wanted him to continue or not.

"I'm almost embarrassed at what I got you," she admitted.

Hermione had honoured tradition and made him something, but now she wished she'd given him something better than an ugly homemade trinket.

"Nonsense," he said. "I love anything you give me."

"Anything?" Hermione teased.

"I take it back. Not *anything*. You're mischievous enough you'll test that theory to its breaking point."

He picked up the present from Hermione from his stack, untying the green ribbon. Inside was a braided leather bracelet she'd made. She'd put initials on each strand. One for her, one for Theo, and one for Titus. She wanted one for Tabitha, but four strands made it too bulky. Over the years, she'd made him several things— a bookmark, a wand holder, a decorated journal—but this was the first piece of jewellery she'd given since the Knut necklace she gave Theo.

"I put a protection Rune on the clasp—the Algiz," she said, feeling herself blush. "It's a little stupid, I know, but I thought it might keep you safe while you're working. It's nothing compared to your usual body armour, and I'm not sure if I cast the accompanying charms correctly, but it's—"

"It's perfect." He held it out, along with his wrist. "Can you help me put it on?"

Her nerves bunched under her skin, stomach flip flopping as she walked up. He kept his eyes on her, which she ignored, securing the bracelet in place with fumbling fingers. She kept missing the loops because her hands trembled.

When she finished, she made the mistake of glancing up. Titus' face was close enough she saw the white flecks in his blue eyes.

The stars and planets still danced around them, slowly rotating as if they produced gravitational pull.

"I'm never going to take it off," he whispered. She froze as he leaned over and kissed her cheek, much too close to her lips, and then pulled back. "Don't hate me for too long. What I said was said in anger and wasn't true. I value your opinions more than anyone else. Besides Theo and Tabitha, you're the only person I love. Always remember that."

The air between them tightened. Titus stood much too close, and she felt like he was leaning in again. Hermione stepped back on instinct. They'd had many physical interactions throughout the years—hugs, holding hands, kisses on cheeks— so Hermione didn't understand why she felt so nervous.

Titus looked down at her feet, as she shuffled backward.

His jaw clenched, and he gave a loud sigh.

"Merry Christmas, Sprite."

Titus turned and walked out, looking frustrated, and Hermione reached up and touched the universe at her throat, reeling in confusion.

Nott Brothers by [Frau Blucher](#)

 Nott Brothers

# Chapter 16: Grown-up Muggleborns

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Kanye West- "Runaway"

As always, a big thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for editing!

Trigger warnings will be posted at the bottom of the chapter for those that need it.

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

## Grown-up Muggleborns

"I can't believe he's letting me go, especially with all the pureblood men there." Hermione stood before the hall mirror— an enchanted one that sang compliments— and completed the last swipe of her dark red lipstick.

"Well, Malfoy is still in France at his Chateau, visiting his cousins." Theo brushed imaginary dust off his shoulder. "That seems to be the only one Titus is truly worried about." He gave a short laugh, as if just thinking of something. "Malfoy will be livid once he finds out."

"You're so handsome, Theodore," the mirror crooned. Hermione rolled her eyes. The mirror never gave her compliments like it did the men. She suspected it might have a crush on the Nott brothers.

Malfoy's absence did disappoint her, but it didn't take away her excitement. They were going to a birthday party at Gregory Goyle's sea-side castle. She'd get a change of location and an opportunity to see Katie, who she hadn't seen since before the Christmas holiday.

Hermione walked out of the room, holding Theo's arm, wearing her favourite dress— black velvet with tiny silver stars dotted across the fabric in the shapes of various constellations. The sleeves were a puffy fabric, billowy and see-through. When she'd bought it two years before, it had hung past her knees, but she must have grown, because it hit a few inches higher, and it clung tight to the curves of her body in a way it hadn't before.

For the first time in her entire life, Hermione felt like an adult. Not a little kid playing dress up.

She walked down the main staircase, still holding onto Theo, but he stopped mid-step.

Titus waited at the bottom of the staircase in his dress robes. The sight of him made her stomach clench with nerves. She'd been avoiding him since Christmas, still angry over what he'd said to her. Despite that, she wore the universe he gave her, tied around her throat.

Titus turned, eyes landing on her, swiping up and down, lingering on her legs. He straightened as if hexed. One of his hands reached out and touched the bannister. A blush crept up her neck at the intense inspection.

"Absolutely not." He shook his head. "Go change."

"Don't tell her what to do," Theo said. "Why are you in dress robes?"

Titus frowned, glaring at his brother, adjusting his cufflinks with an irritated tug.

"Goyle Sr. is having a few head aurors and ministry employees over to approve the plans for the muggle work camp being built."

"Fine," Theo sneered. "Just stay out of my way. I'm going ahead. I'd take you with me, Hermione, but I sense Titus is about to be a tyrant."

They both watched Theo walk down the staircase, shoving past Titus and then headed toward the floor. He grabbed a handful of powder and disappeared inside, leaving the two of them alone.

"Muggle work camp?" She asked.

A chill crept up her spine, but Titus rolled his eyes.

"A *voluntary* work camp. We give them a wage and rations. It's nothing to concern yourself with." He looked her up and down, lingering on her legs again. "What you do need to concern yourself with is a dress change."

"I thought I looked just fine."

"You look beautiful," he said as if to placate her. "But you're showing too much skin to be appropriate, and it's way too tight."

An odd rage filtered through Hermione.

"I spent hours designing my whole look around this dress. *I'm not changing.*"

He looked a little shocked at her outright refusal. She'd never told him no like this.

"What's gotten into you lately? You'll wear something else if you want to go. You have a whole wardrobe full of dresses to choose from."

The fury rose higher. Magic simmered at the tips of her fingers.

"I'm an adult now, capable of making my own decisions. So I *am* going, and I *refuse* to change. If you want me to wear something else, you'll have to rip this dress off me."

She regretted saying it like that.



A shudder ran through Titus, and he froze, his dark gaze heavy, sliding along her skin as if he was contemplating doing exactly as she suggested.

"Is that so? You think you're old enough to make your own decisions when it comes to safety? I thought you didn't want to enter the Trials." He took a step forward, feet near the stairs. "Because *grown-up* muggleborns spend their nights in a wizard's bed. Is that what you're wanting to do?"

The way he emphasised the word nights made her body tingle— a mixture of caution and sudden arousal.

Hermione no longer knew what category she fell into. No longer a child, but not quite old enough for her life after the Trials. Her relationship with Titus had morphed into something else without her understanding what it meant, and she chafed under his overbearing protection.

"If you make me change, I'll hate you again for a *very* long time."

He flinched but didn't waver.

"Nothing new. I think I can stomach that if it means keeping you safe."

Her anger suddenly wrung out, knowing it would lead her nowhere.

"Don't stop me from going. I thought I looked respectable in this. Only my knees are showing for Merlin's sake. I know I lied to you about the fireworks, but why don't you trust me?"

He tilted his head to the side and seemed to be chewing on the inside of his cheek. then his face smoothed, and he loosened his hands, as if deciding something.

"You're right, Sprite. It's time we go." He held out his hand to the floo, telling her to walk, which she did, stomping down the stairs. But when she tried to walk past him, he grabbed her by the waist and tugged her back against his hard chest. She almost lost her balance, but he kept her upright and leaned down, letting his warm lips rest against the shell of her ear. "Just a warning—since you're an *adult* now— if any of those wankers touch you, I'll slice off their fingers. Anything more, and I'll scatter their body parts around Diagon Alley."

Her stomach tumbled to her toes, thinking about Draco and what Titus would do to him if he found out even a fraction of what they'd done.

The hands cinched around her waist loosened and rested on her hips, fingers splayed along the curve.

"Understand?"

"Of course."

Titus released her. She stepped away quickly, twisting around.

He shook his head as if to dislodge something. "Against my better judgement, I'll let you wear the dress, but you'll need to be near me the entire night."

Hermione almost revolted, but then her logic worked. If she pushed too hard, he might still deny her the ability to go to the party. Once she got there, she was sure he'd change his mind and let her spend time with Katie

---

He did not change his mind.

When they arrived, he placed a hand on her back and led her to a darkened room containing the men, many of them Wizengamot members and other ministry employees. Cigar smoke lingered in the air, making her gag. Hermione spent her time looking at the door in longing, wishing to spend time with Katie and Theo.

Instead, she sat on a musty couch with Titus' right arm around her upper shoulders, bored out of her mind. He swished a glass of firewhisky in his left hand, occasionally laughing at bad jokes. His fingers played with the skin on her upper shoulder, right over the gauzy fabric, tracing patterns in an absentminded way. Hermione tried to focus on something else, but the touch distracted her. Normally, she'd think nothing of the physical interaction, but she remembered his lips against her ear, hands splayed on her hips. She tried to ignore the coil slowly tightening in her body, the heat pulsing in her lower stomach.

Most of the discussion centered around internal ministry politics and funding, but when the conversation switched to muggles, she started paying attention.

"The muggles are getting restless again in Glasgow," an ugly man named Rosier said. A bulbous nose took up most of his face, and old age had stolen most of his hair. He'd been leering at Hermione most of the night, attempting to look up her dress, causing her to readjust the hemline multiple times. "Tiberius eradicated a small sect of the Order, but new members keep popping back up like weeds. What do you think needs to be done, Titus?"

Titus considered. His finger stopped tracing patterns.

"I always attempt positive reinforcement first. Reward the rats willing to sell out their neighbours. An extra ration of food for six months usually does the trick. Muggles are filthy, desperate creatures without any nobility, so it's easy to sway them to turn traitor. After that, their morale vanishes. They can't trust each other. And without trust, there's no organisation."

"I'd rather not waste rations," Rosier said. "The parasites take up too many as it is. I think it might be time for another purge—the elderly, the infirm. What's the use of them if they cannot work? Honestly, the muggles should be grateful we'd cut off the dead weight."

Hermione froze. *A purge*. The word made all the hair on her body stand on end. Rosier wasn't talking about killing criminals or the Order. Those would be understandable.

But the elderly? The infirm?

"Would that include you?" Hermione asked Rosier with a sneer. "You look old and useless to me."

All the eyes in the room turned their attention to her, and it went silent. Hermione instantly regretted saying anything, wishing she could shrink back into the cushions and disappear.

"Say you're sorry, Sprite." Titus' hand tightened on her shoulder. She refused to look at him as he bent close. "Right now."

Hermione grit her teeth, unwilling to let the words pass her lips. She meant what she said. Apologising would go against her conscience. She glared at Rosier, showing she wouldn't back down.

They waited, and the silence became oppressive.

She dug her nails into the skin of her legs.

"It's no matter," Rosier drawled in a way that made her skin crawl. "Most muggleborns, like their sires, are a little unruly. There's no need to force your hand right now. I'm sure in private there will be sufficient... punishment." He paused. "As I'm told, your ward doesn't usually misbehave, though I'm also told you spoil her. Maybe it's time you stopped indulging her whims and tightened the leash."

"She's generally very amiable." Titus' hand still gripped her arm so hard she thought it might bruise. "But she's still occasionally careless with youth. I hope you can forgive her."

"Of course," Rosier said. "I enjoy pets more when they have a playful bite. She's eighteen, correct? Have you given thought to when you'd like to start the Trials?"

"She needs to mature more."

Rosier looked her up and down again.

"I think she looks mature enough to breed."

Titus stiffened.

"That's *my* decision," he warned in a low voice.

Rosier waited a moment, as if assessing the situation carefully.

"I can see why you'd want to postpone. Having her under your roof every night must be a... blessing. It would be a shame to give her to another wizard now that you've put so much work into *training* such a pretty thing. Of course, that is unless you plan to put your own token in for her, which—after seeing her—I think I would too, if I was young enough. Personally, I'm looking forward to her Trials. She'll be rather interesting, I think. Though let's hope she arrives *intact*."

She sensed there was a hidden layer to his words, and it made her feel ill.

Titus tugged her closer to him, and Hermione let him.

"Careful what you insinuate. If you continue to make lewd suggestions about my ward, I'll defend her honour in a way I deem appropriate." Titus' voice chilled her. It had the same effect on the men around the room. They all gave furtive looks to each other.

"Is that a threat?"

"The word *threat* implies I may or may not do it. Rest assured, Rosier, if you overstep, I'll have you removed from the Wizengamot, at the very least."

"You couldn't."

"I could slice your throat right here, and no one would do a thing. Hermione was right about you being useless. You're irritating the wrong person. My patience with your opinions has reached an end."

"You're overconfident."

"Would you like to test my *confidence*?"

The challenge hung in the oppressive silence. Titus' hand hovered over the pocket of his trousers, right above his wand. The entire room knew who would win the fight, even against multiple wizards.

"This is a party," Goyle senior cut in, lumbering by with his bottle of whisky, attempting to keep the peace. "Let's not bring politics into it. Here, have another round of drinks and let's watch the game." He snapped his fingers, and an elf walked in, rolling along a muggle television set on a tea cart, already showing a quidditch game. Since the great war, wizards had adopted television, charming them to withstand magical interference. Titus hated anything muggle, so they didn't own one, but most households did.

The stunt worked. The tension broke, and the men began to chat, growing louder as if to compensate for the previous conversation.

The room around them turned animated, but Titus stayed silent, as if something brewed in his mind.

"You aren't going to kill the elderly, are you?" She whispered in a way no one could hear.

"No, there won't be a purge. That's an extreme step—an early method used right after the great war—but it doesn't work, and I never participated in it. It would just create a rallying cry for the muggles and give more recruits to the Order." He tugged her tight to him while looking down at her. "I was wrong to bring you in here. Your heart is soft. It's not a bad thing, but I should have known it would distress you to hear talk of muggles, and I'd rather you be around the boys than the men. You don't need to worry. Bribery works most of the time to root out Order sympathisers. It's rare that I need to do much else."

Of course, it would distress her to hear about the elderly being systematically killed. Who wouldn't be distressed by that? She pursed her lips in indecision, and Titus stared at her,

picking her expression apart.

"Listen, the only time I use violence is if I feel there's no other method, and it's always against people who deserve it. I may not be the best person, but I don't kill the elderly or children, only the terrorists. And although I don't care for muggles, most of them are innocent, and I treat them as such. Any wizard under my command wouldn't dare kill a child, or perform any acts of brutality on innocent people, or I'd string him up alongside the Order."

Hermione nodded, accepting it. He didn't kill James Potter out of cruelty, but out of self-defence. It still didn't make the botched inquiry okay, but it gave a reason beyond evil.

But that wasn't the only thing that unsettled her. The way Rosier talked about the Trials... It gave her an ominous feeling deep in her stomach that there was something more she didn't know.

Titus sighed and ran a hand through his hair— a sign he was stressed.

"It was selfish of me to keep you close tonight." He let go of her shoulder, stood up, and offered his hand. "Let's go find Theo and Katie. I'm sure they're both missing you."

---

Hermione stayed with Theo and Katie the rest of the night. Marcus hovered in the corner, hiding his jagged teeth behind his lips as much as possible, embarrassed by them. Every time he tried to talk to Katie, he stuttered and found something else to do. Hermione could tell it both annoyed and amused Katie by her expression. To be fair, Katie wasn't the nicest, always sneering at him or giving underhanded comments.

Soon enough, Mrs. Goyle called Katie away.

"She promised Flint we'd have dinner together." Katie frowned showing Hermione what she thought of that. "I don't know what the woman thinks we'll talk about. This will be terrible, but— I guess I should get used to it if I'll have to live with him." She gave a shudder and another frown.

"Good luck," Hermione said with a grin. "Don't be too mean to him."

"Me? Mean?" Katie placed a hand on her chest in faux outrage. "I'd never be mean."

Besides Draco, Katie might be the meanest person she knew.

"Just talk to him about quidditch. Theo told me he was Captain his sixth and seventh year. You have a common interest."

"Ugh, I'll try, but Greg told me he's a Falmouth Falcons fan. I'm not sure that will go well."

Hermione rolled her eyes just as Mrs. Goyle bustled in, already annoyed Katie was taking too long. She gave a wave as she walked out.

After that, Hermione sat by Theo as he played a muggle card game called poker. Blaise taught them it, shuffling the cards and passing them out. The game relied a lot on deception,

and Blaise was very good at it, which didn't surprise her. Theo did okay. Poor Greg lost all his weekly allowance in the first thirty minutes. The other boys—one named Montague and the other Pucey—played decently, enough to keep the game going.

"I'm going to the loo," she whispered to Theo after they started another game. He gave a nod, concentrating on the cards. It was just down the hallway, almost within sight, so she didn't demand Theo lead her there, and neither did he offer.

After relieving herself and washing her hands, she walked out, but stopped. Further down the hallway was the entrance to what was unmistakably the Goyle library. Without overthinking, her feet led her further down the darkened path.

She walked inside and sucked in a breath of reverence. It was spacious but not nearly as grand as the Nott library, and a fine layer of dust coated everything. It was obvious no one used it much, just a showpiece. Not even the elves cleaned it.

Hermione walked in, giving a slight sneeze. She weaved in and out among the stacks, running her hands along the titles, most ancient and crumbling, held together with preservation spells.

Toward the back, next to a stained-glass window, she pulled one off the shelf— a book on the dark arts— something she wouldn't have been able to touch back home. A thought struck her, and she hesitated, but the temptation was too much to resist.

Hermione slid the book off the shelf and slipped it into her purse. It disappeared inside before she could second-guess her decision. Her palms itched and her heart beat furiously at the risk. Theft wasn't something to take lightly against another pureblood. Titus wouldn't punish her physically, but she didn't trust his black moods lately.

Still— when would she have another chance to gain knowledge? And from the looks of it, the books would hardly be noticed. The greedy hunger overwhelmed her, and she pushed aside any concerns. Just like the wands, Hermione considered this a necessary risk. The thirst inside her needed to be slaked, or she'd go mad. What Titus gave her wasn't enough, and she dared not ask for more.

Hermione went through the titles on a mission. She couldn't risk taking too many, deciding to stop it at five. That meant she'd need to be picky about what she chose.

Defensive Spells for Duelling

Advanced Ancient Rune Translation

Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration

Hermione walked into a secluded alcove of the library only lit by a few fairy lights, knowing she didn't have much more time. The dark wrapped around her, bringing a chill. This section was darker, more forgotten. She trailed her fingers along the shelves, stopping at one book.

It had no title, standing out from the rest. Just a leather bound book without any embellishment. With curiosity, she pulled it off the shelf. Besides an odd blue design in the corner, nothing was on the front cover. She squinted at the symbol and then almost dropped it in shock, just barely shoving the book back into place, withholding a shiver of revulsion.

The book wasn't bound in leather.

It was *human* skin.

The design had been a tattoo on some unfortunate soul. It was obviously a Rune, but not any that she could identify. The book was old, probably older than any book she'd ever seen. Even with preservation spells, it should be crumbling in her hands; its excellent condition meant it was being protected by strong blood magic, most likely with sacrificial roots.

Whatever this book contained was so dark or powerful a wizard in the past killed another human to keep it intact.

A malevolent air pulsed off the book. She should leave it be and exit the library.

But it called to her. A secret knowledge. Whatever this book contained was *not* meant for her, which meant she wanted it more than anything.

Fuck Titus and his rules. If he refused to give magic to her, she'd take it outright, slip it from hands wishing to tug it from her. The pulsing darkness seemed to feed on her anger, making it grow greater.

She only had a moment to wonder where the vitriol sprouted from. It welled up from deep inside her, a fury she'd just recognized. It felt like she had carried it all her life, lying dormant in her heart. Now that she recognized the feeling, it rose in uncontrollable waves— an almost murderous fury.

Hermione grabbed the dark arts book and placed it in her purse with a determination that surprised her.

"Well, well, well, the little mudblood is also a thief."

The words slicked down her spine.

She twisted to see Blaise leaning against a bookshelf, his arms crossed on his chest and one of his fake smiles tugging at his lips. She'd never believed the expression. There was a disconnect from the smile to his eyes, an emptiness when he looked at someone, as if he was the predator and they the prey.

The threat he posed was not in his intelligence like Draco, but in his lack of humanity. She saw it when his mask briefly slipped. She sensed there were no limits to his cruelty.

The danger instinctively caused the hair to raise across her body. She backed up until she was pressed against the bookshelf. Fairy light flickered around them, contorting his face in the shadows.

"No worries, house pet, I won't tell anyone about your sticky fingers."

"Stop calling me that."

He gave a laugh.

"That's what you are, you know that right?" He pointed to the necklace encircling her throat that Titus had given her. "Titus even gave you a collar. You can call yourself something else, I suppose, but it doesn't change the reality."

"Theo will look for me soon."

"Is that what you're counting on? He's nearly sloshed." He brushed his fingers against his thumb together, as if thinking. "Now that I have a captive audience, I'd like you to help me solve a little mystery."

"Not intelligent enough to figure it out on your own?"

He gave a quick sneer.

"Why bother, when the object of the mystery is before me?"

Hermione's eyes scanned the room, but there were no easy exits; they were boxed in by bookshelves. She could scream for help, but then Titus would know what she'd been doing in the library.

"It's an odd feeling to know you've been obliterated." Blaise seemed to sense her growing fear, straightening. "There's an obvious gap in my memory, but the only thing I managed to uncover was a brief glance of *your* face, along with another person, who I believe had pale blond hair. Now what did I see in the astronomy tower that was so naughty Malfoy obliterated me?"

"Nothing."

"Hmm, no, I doubt that." His grin grew. "Do you want to know my theory?" He walked forward, and Hermione glanced around, again wondering how to get away, but the only exit would require shoving past him. "I think you and Malfoy were having a bit of illegal fun. He tried to be light-handed while erasing my memories to not scramble my mind, but enough slipped through to solve the puzzle."

"You're not allowed to be alone with me." Hermione felt desperate.

"Is that what you told Draco too?"

He lunged at her, like a snake, grabbing her shoulders and pushing her hard against the books. One ancient tome hissed at her.

Hermione began to struggle and cried out, but Blaise slapped his hand over her mouth.



"No need for dramatics. I just want a sample before offering to buy. Wasn't that what Malfoy was doing? Besides, I doubt your master hasn't had fun with you, especially with the way he looks at you. A fit witch like you in the same manor? He can't fuck you, but I bet he's played with you a time or two. If I had a pet like you, you'd be on your knees servicing me any time I pleased."

His pupils dilated, as if just the thought aroused him.

She made a noise of terror behind his hand. She tried, but from the angle he held her, she couldn't reach her purse where her wand was.

His hand slipped behind her head and grabbed her curls in a tight hold.

"In fact, that's exactly what I want you to do right now. You'll get on your knees, open those pretty lips like the whore you are and suck me dry." He yanked on her curls, making her eyes water. "Make no mistake, you're a filthy fucking mudblood only valuable for your cunt. Nothing but a place to fill with pureblood cum."

"I'll scream."

"You won't," he said. "Sure, I might get in trouble, but so would you. I wonder how much freedom you'll have then. Poor little mudblood locked in the manor, strapped to a bed with her legs open, only allowed out with a wizard's permission."

Blaise gave a sharp laugh and leaned in, and Hermione decided to take a risk. She pooled the energy into her hand and twisted her wrist, intending to shove him away. The fear strengthened her magic, sending Blaise flying backward. The act caused an internal strain, like pulling a muscle, and she gasped with the pain. Blaise smacked against a bookcase, making it wobble a moment before he slid to the floor. He stared up at her, open mouthed. She lifted her hand in threat, showing she'd do it again.

"What the fuck did you just do?" He tilted his head.

"Leave. Me. Alone."

Blaise stood up, and Hermione kept her hand raised, though she doubted what more she could do. Since gaining a wand, her wandless magic suffered from lack of practice. Unwilling to be without protection, Hermione searched through her purse with her free hand. When her fingers closed around the wood, she brought it out and pointed it between Blaise's eyes.

There was a beat of silence as he comprehended the fact she held a wand—her own.

"So the little house pet has been learning tricks beyond sit and stay?" He grinned as if he'd won something, and she felt it twisting through her. He took a step toward her, and she straightened the wand, gritting her teeth. "I think I just discovered what would make Titus tick."

"If I were you, I wouldn't attempt to blackmail him. That would be your last mistake."

"I think we can come to an agreement. A token for my silence. The Wizengamot would put him in Azkaban if they discovered you had your own wand." He took another step forward. Hermione reviewed all the defensive spells she knew, prepared to use them. "After I win your Trials and have you under my control, I'm going to make you call me master while I fuck every part of you." He pointed to her lips. "Your mouth so you'll stay silent." His finger dropped. "Your arse so you won't be so uptight. And then your cunt so it can be used for your only purpose in life. And after you pop out three or four kids, I'll lock you in your room to rot. Or maybe I'll sell you to someone like Rosier. I'm sure he wouldn't mind sloppy leftovers. The possibilities are endless."

Blaise straightened his robes, holding onto the collar of his shirt, as if unworried about the wand pointed at him.

She'd never been spoken to like this. Her sense of safety shifted and cracked. The contents of her stomach threatened to come out at all he threatened, and she shivered, trying to suppress her fear.

He winked.

"See you soon, house pet."

Art by [juxtaposedmusings](#)



## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: attempted sexual assault

# Chapter 17: A Spinning Ballerina

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: xxxtentacion– "I spoke to the devil in miami, he said everything would be fine"

A/N: This story is Hermione-centric, meaning that Dramione is integral to the overall plot, but it's secondary to her character arc. The first section of this story (chapter 1 through 21) doesn't feature him as much. He'll be in it a lot more after that.

The lovely Frau Blucher drew an amazing fanart of the Coven of the Tree. I put it at the bottom of chapter 11. Go check it out!

MyPrivateInsanity deserves all the kudos for her editing skills!

Trigger Warning posted at the end for those that need it.

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

## A Spinning Ballerina

When Hermione got home, she ran to the bathroom and vomited. Titus, seeing her distress, followed her and rapped on the door with his knuckles.

"Are you okay?"

Hermione wiped her mouth, sitting back but still hovering over the toilet. "I must have eaten something bad."

"I'll tell Bitty to get you a potion to settle your stomach."

A potion would do nothing. It wasn't food; it was horror.

For the first time since she was a child, she feared a monster. Blaise planned to wiggle his way into her future. The dilemma of what to do made her ill. She couldn't tell Titus. But neither could she stay silent.

For an entire week, she agonised over the decision. In the end, it was ripped from her hands.

Blaise arrived through the floo a day before winter break ended. Hermione had thought it was Theo coming back from Diagon Alley with his new quills. But instead, she saw Zabini enter

Nott Manor, cleaning off the ash from exquisitely tailored black robes. Hermione froze in the doorway, watching as Bitty asked his name and purpose and then popped away to tell Titus.

Blaise looked up, met her eyes, and gave a wink, biting back a smirk as he placed his hands behind his back.

Theo had told her that he was raised by a single mum. His father died in Zabini's childhood, and his mum had a rotation of stepfathers and suitors stepping in and out of his life. If he weren't so horrid, she might have been sympathetic.

Titus walked into the room from the opposite side. When he reached Blaise, he stuck out his hand. Blaise grabbed it, shaking hard.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Zabini?"

Titus sounded calm, though she wasn't fooled by it. He was constantly analysing everyone in his environment, watching every detail of their movements, expressions and actions, which made him able to read people without the use of legilimency. He'd once told her that people gave away their secrets through their body language. A person just needed to pay attention.

Titus did the same now to Blaise, eyes sliding over him. Hermione wondered if he sensed the same things she did— a complete disconnect, something lacking in the soul.

Titus released his hand after holding it for a little longer than normal.

"I'm here to offer my token for Hermione."

Titus straightened with an expression a bit more hostile, though he smoothed it over.

"And why should I consider you?"

"As you know, my father was from a deeply respected Italian pureblood family— one of the oldest in the world— dating back to the Roman era. I'm also second in my class, and I've already secured an internship with Gringotts."

Titus glanced back, catching her eye. She still stood in the doorway, unsure how to escape the situation.

"Come here, Sprite."

She obeyed, shuffling in. The nerves jumped in her stomach again. Blaise played a game, but so did Titus. She saw the question in his eyes— why would Blaise have the audacity to show up at Nott Manor and ask to put in a token?

"What do you think?" Titus asked.

Hermione let herself relax, loosening each tense muscle before responding. What could Zabini do, really? She decided to call his bluff.

"No."

Titus turned back to Blaise, who looked aghast that he even asked her opinion.

"Then no."

Blaise pulled his lips back in pure disgust.

"Letting your pet decide? This should be reported and investigated by the Wizengamot. You must be confused about who is the dog and who is the master."

Titus didn't move, though his wand hand twitched.

"If Hermione doesn't like someone, then I don't like them either," Titus answered. "The Wizengamot wouldn't investigate me denying you a token. You're a second-rate wizard, and you'll stay second-rate. It's why you want Hermione, thinking an association with her will bolster you in the public eye. But she's more of a witch than you'd *ever* be a wizard."

Blaise grit his teeth, eyes finally sparking to life. It seemed the only emotion he could dredge from his soul was a feral type of rage.

"They'll investigate you once I tell them you've given your little pet a wand." Blaise wore a smug smirk with the subsequent silence. "Lucky for you, I don't really care. No one needs to know a thing. And before you decide to retaliate, just know that several important figures already have scrolls charmed to reveal the secret within the hour... that is, unless I deactivate it." He straightened his robes. "I'm willing to overlook the previous insult, as long as we have a deal. A token for my silence."

She didn't even see Titus extract his wand. It sprung into his hand.

"Cruico!"

Blaise collapsed against the ground, screaming in agony, body twisting into contortions.

"Coming into my house, threatening me?" Titus bared his teeth, holding the spell longer than she thought possible. The curse cast frightful shadows on his face. Hermione scrambled back, unable to believe what she was seeing.

Titus was using an *unforgivable*. She'd read about them in her stolen defence book, and though she knew he had killed people, she never thought him capable of an unforgivable.

When he let up the curse, Titus stepped toward Blaise. Each click of his boot on the tile below built the threat until he stood above him. Blaise's body still trembled with the shock of the torture.

"What am I going to do with you?" Titus crouched down and placed the tip of his wand next to his jugular. "I really want to unravel your insides. I'd like to see your expression while I do it. On every person, it's always the same, even if they know it's coming. It's as if they didn't quite believe they'd actually die. But they do, of course, usually quite painfully."

Blaise managed to sneer through his involuntary spasms.

"You're not allowed to kill me," his voice was cracking. "My mother is sleeping with Walter Filibus. "

"Your mother's cunt isn't worth that much."

"They'll put you in Azkaban."

"Do you really think they'd arrest me?"

"The law—"

"I *am* the law." Titus gave a derisive laugh. "You're going to learn a hard lesson today that political games are best left to the adults that understand them."

"They'll care that she can do magic with and without a wand."

"You miscalculated two things. One," he said. "I care for Hermione, making what you propose a threat to my family. Two—" His lips curled in disdain. "Your threat no longer has teeth for the bite. If you'd made it six months ago, I might have hesitated, but not anymore. I made sure of that. It might accelerate a few plans, but it's nothing I couldn't manage. No one is taking her from me, least of all you. The members of the Wizengamot now either owe me favours, life debts, or they're afraid of me... as you should have been."

Though it was obvious he tried to remain unaffected, Blaise made a small noise of disbelief.

Titus just stared, cocking his head. He leaned down with a glint in his eye and placed his wand to the middle of Blaise's chest, splitting his shirt apart with a rip, baring his chest.

"Due to my deep respect for your late father, I'll give you a warning. Try to threaten me again, and I'll drag your corpse to your mother."

For the first time, Zabini looked scared, as if he never thought Titus would actually harm him.

"Let's make a deal. I think we could—"

Titus ran his wand again down Blaise's exposed skin, and a low scream was ripped from his lips. When Titus finally pulled away, a thick line of welted flesh was left down the middle of his chest, seeping small droplets of blood.

"You need to stop talking."

Blaise panted, ribs expanding and shuddering. Involuntary tears ran down his cheeks. Hermione could only stare, unsure what to feel. Seeing Titus' violence disturbed her, but what disturbed her more was the satisfaction she felt hearing Blaise's pained scream. She'd never thought of herself as cruel, but she'd watched the torture, wishing it had been *her* wand, *her* vengeance. The intensity of it scared her.

"How did he know about the wand, Sprite?" Titus' voice was low like a growl. He reached into his robe and pulled out a knife. The cloying slime of dark magic dripped from it.

Hermione grabbed the sides of her dress, bunching the fabric in her hands.

"He cornered me in the Goyle library." She saw no need to lie anymore. He'd probably tear through Blaise's memories soon.

Titus flicked his eyes to her. In the few seconds they connected, she felt splayed open for him to read.

"Did he touch you?"

"He—he grabbed my face."

His eyes narrowed.

"Anywhere else?"

"He pulled the back of my hair. He wanted me to get on my knees and—" The words caught in her throat. "He told me to open my mouth to— I used my magic to protect myself."

Titus' rage slid off his face, replaced by a cold mask.

"What did I say would happen if any of them touched you?"

Her heart jolted, remembering his breath on her neck, hands on her hips.

"You'd slice their fingers off."

"What kind of man would I be if I didn't stand by my word?"

Blaise began to struggle while cursing, but Titus knelt down, trapping his wrist to the ground with his knee. He used a nonverbal spell to keep the rest of him in place.

The room went still for several moments, as if a single breath would tip into chaos.

"I want you to go and wait for me in the back sitting room, Sprite." Titus tapped the flat side of the knife against Blaise's cheek. "I need to teach Zabini how to respect his betters. It might be awhile before I can join you. I think I'll take my time."

Hermione hesitated, wishing to stay. She'd never seen this brutal, cold side of Titus. But with one look at Titus, she knew she wouldn't win that argument.

She twisted and exited the room, shutting the door.

Before she even made it down the hallway, Blaise began screaming.

---

Hermione waited on a small red velvet settee. The back sitting room had been his mother's favourite. Compared to the rest of the house, the colours were light, with walls a soothing cream. A big picture window took up one wall, overlooking the north gardens. The giant

unicorn statue stood in the center of the garden, surrounded by a maze of hedges. She'd loved it as a child, climbing on the unicorn's back, pretending it could come alive.

It could, she supposed. Titus told her long ago that all the statues around the property were spelled to animate and protect the family if under attack. Hogwarts had a similar security system. It had only been used once around four hundred years before. The statues slaughtered the invaders, leaving body parts strewn across the gardens.

Hermione turned her focus to the art on the sitting room walls. Dancers leaped and posed. A ballerina performed a pretty pirouette, looking as elegant as a swan as she then twirled, extending her arms and legs in turns. Theatre and dance were one of the few entertainments that muggles and wizards shared, even before the great war, though there were slight differences— or, at least, that's what she'd been told.

The door cracked open, and Titus entered. He pulled to a stop and stared at her while she studied the portraits. Then he slowly made his way to a cream-colored sofa across from her. He sat, smoothing his shirt. He'd cleaned most of the blood off him, but a splash of crimson marred his cheek.

"That one was my mothers' favourite." Titus pointed to the ballerina. "She bought it shortly after her marriage." He paused, as if expecting a reply, but she couldn't look at him. "She would have liked you. You both have strong spirits, and she wasn't afraid to tell my father her opinion. When she was at Hogwarts, she was a Ravenclaw and Head Girl. Many of the selections in the library were for her love of books."

"Are they? I wouldn't know."

"Look at me, Sprite."

"No."

"Please."

She shook her head, eyes on the twirling ballerina. Around and around on her toes, arm outstretched.

"I shouldn't have attacked him in front of you."

The violence disturbed her, but she was glad Zabini could no longer hurt her. She suspected if Titus hadn't put him in his place, the Malfoys would have.

It was the fact he was going to take her books again. The moment she informed him she went into the Goyle library, he knew she'd taken some. If she looked at him, she might hate him again.

She'd already decided to gather the books herself, before he had a chance to order her. She'd stopped by her room and had taken them out of her purse. Taking a risk, she'd left the one bound in skin.

Hermione placed her hand on top of the small stack of books next to her on the settee.



"These are what you're after."

She heard him sigh.

"Even if I overlooked your theft, I can't ignore how you put yourself in danger. Do you see now why I'm strict with my rules? He could have really hurt you. If he hadn't been the last Zabini, I would have gutted him."

Her head whipped around, forgetting that she didn't want to look at him. It was a mistake. His blue eyes glowed in the winter light, trapping her into his gaze.

"But he didn't," Hermione argued. "I'm not some wilting flower. I was perfectly capable of defending myself. If you'd let me have complete access to our library, I could have done even more."

"You fought fine against Zabini," he said, as if to placate her. "But you wouldn't have stood a chance against a more competent wizard, especially if they surprised you. I know you've started to chafe under the restrictions you're under, but you must learn to accept them. The rules are there to keep you safe, not to punish you."

Hermione felt like she was suffocating. She didn't want him speaking to her when her emotions boiled to the surface.

"I wish to be alone," she said.

He ran a hand through his hair and stood up.

"I'm afraid I can't do that." His jaw clenched, fist curling at his side before straightening. His temper was on a tight leash. Whatever he was about to say made him very angry—so angry he didn't trust himself. "When I went through Blaise's memories, I found something... concerning."

Hermione dug her fingers into the fabric of the settee. She prepared herself, stiffening her spine for the upcoming storm, knowing what he sought.

Titus walked over. She attempted to keep her eyes flat while he cupped the bottom of her jaw and tugged it up, keeping her stare.

"Were you ever alone with Draco Malfoy?"

"No." As much as she tried, it sounded rushed and tight. She tried to keep her expression neutral, but she failed.

Just as his hand tightened, she wrenched herself away from him and scrambled across the room, pressing herself to the wall next to the ballerina. She'd never seen Titus this angry, almost unhinged. Not even when she used the prank fireworks.

He took big gulping breaths and started to pace. Bringing both his hands to his hair, he dug them in and tugged, making a noise of rage.

"What did you do with him?" He stopped pacing and took a few steps closer.

"Nothing," she said. "We just talked."

"What did I say about lying?"

"We kissed!" She yelled, throwing all her emotions into it so it would distract him. A kiss was more innocent than what they'd done in the glade. She'd learned long ago to give away the least to deflect from the worst.

"You fucking kissed him!" He roared and walked forward until he nearly pressed against her, hands placed on the wall on either side of her head.

"We just kissed," she said again, this time softer.

"Anything more?" He asked, showing all his teeth in a snarl. He looked as if he wanted to reach forward and bite her. "Did he touch you?"

"Do you think I'd let him do that?" She answered a question with a question. Titus was usually cool enough to catch the manipulation, but he was seething, panting hard.

"I don't know what you'll do anymore. Every time I turn my back, you're being reckless." He paused and closed his eyes briefly, trying to regain control. "Maybe I should start your Trials before you do something irrevocably stupid."

"Don't." Panic spiked through her at the threat. "You promised."

He shook his head and then leaned down, resting his forehead on hers. His hands transferred to her neck, sliding them up and tangling in her hair. Hermione froze, unsure what to do with how close their faces were. His breath warmed her lips. A clean scent drifted toward her, mixed with cinnamon.

"Was it after Theo's games?" He made a frustrated noise. "Fuck, of course, it was after— Theo is not going to like our next conversation. I can't believe you gave that spoiled git your first kiss. He—"

"Don't get mad at Theo," she whispered. "I escaped him and found Draco. We kissed. Nothing more, I swear."

His hands tightened and then he released her. Maybe he believed her... or maybe he just *wanted* to believe her.

"I'm going to kill Malfoy."

"No!" Hermione cried, knowing he truly meant the threat. "It was *my* fault. I was the one who kissed him." Which wasn't a lie, and wasn't quite the truth. "I—I wanted to know what it felt like. I found one of your mother's books, and the man kissed the woman he loved—"

"Draco doesn't love you."

"How would you know?"

Titus walked back to the couch. He sat down, resting his elbows on his knees, and stared at the floor. Hermione had trouble reading him, but she thought he might be wounded, which only confused her. She'd rather he be angry again.

"Because, if he did, he wouldn't have risked so much for a kiss. What you're experiencing is infatuation, not love."

She agreed with him. She didn't love Draco, but she also didn't like being told what to do.

"So you're the expert on love now? Every week there's a new woman entering the manor, and you have the audacity to lecture me on feelings."

Titus' eyes snapped up. They burned through her, pinning her into place.

"Oh, I know what it feels like to love." He stood again, eerily calm, wearing his cold mask. He walked over to the window, staring out, clasping his hands behind his back. "And I also know it requires sacrifices. Denying impulses and selfish desires for the sake of the other person."

Hermione reeled with the words, trying to decipher what he was really saying.

"Your feelings are natural," he said more softly, as if conceding something. "Everyone your age has... urges. The kiss wasn't inherently wrong. You're both stupid and young, but it can't ever happen again. Not until the Trials. You have no clue what you and Draco are risking. If he'd — compromised you, all of us would have been punished severely."

She didn't think Titus' threat toward Malfoy was gone. He never forgot a slight. She knew he was only pretending to concede for her sake. Draco was in serious danger.

Her eyes felt hot for the first time in years, the closest she'd gotten to crying. The broken shards in her chest lacerated something. The fear emptied out of her, leaving a familiar suffocation, a feeling that had been growing all year.

"So I can't kiss Draco, but you get to have sex with whoever you want?"

"Don't be crude," he said.

"Answer the question."

Titus twisted to view her. He looked beautiful framed by the light from the window. Her protector. Her guardian. He was the axis to her world. But at the moment, he looked as unyielding as the statues decorating the garden.

"That's the harsh reality," he said. "You can either fight against it and choose to be miserable, or you can accept your circumstances. We all have roles and duties. Do you think I wanted to become the head of this household at sixteen? Do you think I was ready to take the responsibility for you and Theo? I was just a child myself, but I stood up and did what I had to. And no, I *don't* get to spend my nights with whoever I want. I'm bound by rules too." He

closed his eyes for a moment. "My job is to protect you, even if it's from yourself, which is why I'm going to ban you from Hogwarts forever."

"Forever?" She could see the grey towers now. The quidditch pitch. The lake. The astronomy tower. The library. The glade filled with flowers. She didn't even know it was something to grieve until it was taken.

"I wish I didn't have to do this, but you've left me no choice. I'm not even going to use legilimency to find out if you've told the truth, though I want to. I'll let you keep your dignity in that, because it no longer matters. From this point on, you won't be able to do anything rebellious, because I won't give you the opportunity to put yourself at risk."

For the past few months, she'd felt like a flower, blooming in the sun. But the dark clouds smothered the light, leaving her exposed to the harsh elements. She placed a hand to her sternum.

A sob broke from behind her lips. It surprised even her. After, she pressed her lips together, refusing to let another slip out.

He looked alarmed at her reaction.

"Fuck—don't cry."

He walked close to her again, attempting to comfort her, but she shoved at his shoulders. It didn't move him, but he stopped, surprised. She'd never physically lashed out at him like that.

"Don't touch me!"

"Sprite—"

"Just leave me alone. I don't want you anywhere near me!"

Titus recoiled, as if she'd physically hit him.

She hurt his feelings with her rejection, and she hated that she cared.

He bowed his head a little with a frown, staring at the floor as if he could find the solution to his problems in the wooden planks.

"As you wish." He walked out of the room and slammed the door behind him. The sound echoed around her, settling into her soul.

Hermione sat back down and stared at the ballerina.

Spinning around and around.

Trapped in the painting.

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Torture

# Chapter 18: Protection Runes

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: The Lumineers– "Stubborn Love"

As usual, MyPrivateInsanity is the BAMF of the day for being an awesome editor!

### Protection Runes

"Can anyone tell me the fifteen uses of bluebottle fly wings in potions?" Professor Booth asked. Hermione waited, hand itching to raise, but she gave her friends a few moments to answer. Julie seemed to be thinking. Dean tapped a beat with his quill. Finch was in the middle of a magnificent doodle of a niffler. And Katie looked a few moments from being asleep. "Anyone?" Professor Booth sighed. "Very well, Hermione, I know you already know. Explain to the—"

The door opened, and Titus entered. Katie raised her head as she jolted awake, showing the side of her face had indentions from her scroll. The rest of the class went silent.

Titus never interrupted her school, usually busy at work.

Hermione watched as he walked over, eyes on the blackboard, and slid into an empty desk beside her.

"Continue," Titus said with a wave of his hand. "I'd like to see what you're teaching the students."

There was a hard note behind his words, and Hermione's spine stiffened.

The Professor looked toward her as if for her to continue answering the question, but Hermione refused to play Titus' mind games.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Since you've shown a penchant for thievery, I decided to investigate to see if you've done it before. Turns out you've been hiding something bigger."

Titus reached into the bag by his side. He took out a book and placed it on the desk in front of him.

One of her muggle books.

Inside the fake cover was a book on physics, one she'd only gotten halfway through. Even though she didn't understand most of what was covered in the book, it still compelled her curiosity to understand, frustrating her that the answers stayed out of reach.

And now she might never know the answers.

Titus must have found her bookshelf in the treehouse. She'd used multiple concealment charms, but that meant nothing to a wizard of Titus' calibre. Her brain frantically went through which books she'd stashed there. All of her most important items— the skin-bound book, the Nott defence book, and the wands— she'd kept under her floorboards. Thankfully.

Only the muggle books, along with a few others she'd stolen over the years, were in the treehouse.

Still, her heart sank to her toes. Professor Booth had his eyes fixed on the book, knowing, just as she did, the danger of the moment.

"Class is dismissed," Titus said "Your masters are here to pick you up."

Her friends glanced at each other in confusion, but they all obeyed in unison, completely silent while filing out. Katie tried to catch her eye, but she shook her head, keeping her stare forward.

"Who are you, really?" Titus asked her professor a few moments after her friends left. "It was a brilliant cover, going as far as killing the real Booth, and the polyjuice must have been expensive— expensive enough to suggest access to Order resources."

Her professor went to his chair and collapsed. His initial fear smoothed away, replaced by resignation. Instead of looking at Titus, his eyes went to Hermione.

"My real name is Franklin Thibodeaux," he said. "I'm sure you've heard of me."

The name meant nothing to Hermione, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw Titus flinch and tense.

"Of course," he said, voice like a sword. "How could I ever forget one of the men responsible for my parents' deaths? The only one who managed to escape justice."

Hermione startled, unable to hide her gasp of surprise. She placed her hand against her lips.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your mother. She was a pure soul." Her professor's eyes somehow softened, despite the danger. "But your father deserved the violence of his death, just like *you* will when the time comes."

Titus reached into the pocket of his robe and took out his wand. His hand trembled in fury before he regained his control.

"Is that what you planned?" he asked. "To kill me?"

"I have no need to kill you. Life finds its own way. Violent men have violent ends."

Titus scoffed.

"That's a rosy view of life. But fitting, I suppose, considering where you're heading." Titus rolled his wand in his fingers. "If you didn't infiltrate my home to kill me, then what was your purpose?"

Her professor sighed, as if he wore a heavy cloak that weighed him down.

"Stop the ruse. You know exactly what my purpose was, though you did a magnificent job brainwashing her. Despite that, I think I made significant headway. By the end of the year, I think I could have smuggled her out by her own volition."

Hermione could tell that Titus was on the brink of snapping.

"Why bother risking so much for a single muggleborn?"

Her professor once again looked at Hermione. This time it was laced in pity.

"You know as well as I do that she's no ordinary muggleborn." Her professor glanced out the window, as if deep in thought. "More importantly, I promised her father I would take care of her if anything ever happened to him. After all, she is my goddaughter... but you knew that too."

Goddaughter! Hermione didn't know if she could be any less shocked. There were so many questions she wished to ask, but Hermione knew she'd get no answers with Titus in the room.

"Taking care of her is *my* job," Titus seethed, words escaping behind clenched teeth. "I never asked for help in the matter. She doesn't need anyone but me. You know how this ends, don't you?"

Her professor— no, her godfather— gave a small nod.

"I know what you're capable of, Butcher. Though I also know you like to follow the rules, only deviating when you can. You'll have me arrested, and then you'll argue for my execution. I'm sure you'll volunteer to do the deed."

Silence ensued.

"You've missed a crucial step," Titus said. "Before I kill you, they'll allow me to interrogate you. I'll leave it to your imagination how thoroughly I'll do the job. Death will feel like a mercy in the end. "



Still, the professor remained unmoved. If he felt any fear, he buried it deep. Titus thumped his fist against the desk, signalling for three aurors to enter the room, wands raised. Her professor gave no resistance as they searched his robes, taking out his wand and a book that he'd probably meant to give her that day.

"Your father would be proud of you," her godfather said as they yanked him around. "Don't stop being—"

"Silencio," Titus said, unwilling to let him talk to her anymore.

Desperation, horror, and guilt built inside her.

"I'm sorry," she told her professor. The back of her eyes burned with unshed tears. "I tried to hide the books, but there was no place to put—"

"Be quiet, Sprite."

Hermione lurched in a breath, meeting her professor's eyes one more time as he was taken out of the room. He didn't seem angry at her, he only looked sad and tired.

The doors slammed after the aurors left, and Hermione flinched with the sound. They sat there side by side, until Titus pocketed his wand.

"Don't kill him," she whispered. It was futile, she knew, but she had to try.

"Don't ask that of me."

"Then don't torture him... for me."

He grimaced.

"This is bigger than you, Sprite. He has many secrets that I need."

Again, they sat in silence. Hermione felt everything at once. The horror of her professor's fate. The pity for Titus, encountering one of the orchestrators of his parents' murders. The shock of meeting her godfather, only to lose him. The guilt that her decision to accept the books had led to this moment.

"You've put me in an impossible situation." His voice was rough. "Other masters would beat you for this. I still should punish you, so that you understand the egregious nature of what you did, because clearly you haven't learned any lessons. You've been stealing and lying and sneaking behind my back—" He gave a deep sigh and placed his elbows on the table, leaning his face into his hands. "But I know doing that will only make you hate me more, and I—" He made a low growl in the back of his throat. "I don't want to be this person to you. I want to make you happy. Seeing you upset tears out my soul."

"I'm sorry," she said. But she didn't feel sorry. She felt angry that she'd been denied what she wanted in the first place. Angry that he arrested her godfather. Did that make her selfish?

At her apology, he seemed to sink further into his hands.

"You're curious," he said. It sounded like he was reasoning to himself. "He offered you knowledge, and of course, you took it. I should end this school... but I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. I'm going to believe that even if he had offered to take you away that you wouldn't have been foolish enough to leave. Because the punishment I'd be forced to give you for conspiring with the Order would hurt your spirit."

He reached out his hand and grabbed hers, but she tugged it away, wanting nothing to do with him right now. He closed his eyes as if in pain and stood up, gently placing the book in front of her, like an offering, like an apology.

"The Order is made up of monsters, Hermione. Worse than I could ever be. Have you forgotten what they did to my parents? They kill innocent women and children indiscriminately in their attacks. Their goal is chaos and destruction. Your professor didn't have good intentions, despite what you may think." He pinched the bridge of his nose and then looked down at her. "Please stop putting me in this position. I want to be your ally. I want—" He sighed. "We'll talk later when you're not so angry with me, and I'm not so angry with you." He hesitated. "Do you have any more secrets left? If you tell me now, I promise I won't get angry."

She didn't believe him. If he discovered the wands, he'd never let her see her friends again.

"No."

His lips thinned as he pressed them together. His stare pierced her, but she didn't care anymore.

"I'll give you some time to reconsider your answer."

He left the room in a rush, and Hermione remained, wondering how she could feel so guilty for lying to him. In defiance, she opened the book he'd left in front of her and began to read, wanting to escape the turmoil in her mind.

---

Hermione's fury burned hot for days. She ignored Titus. He didn't attempt to talk to her at first, knowing he'd only bear the brunt of her ire. The walls that once felt like home were starting to feel like a prison.

A week after the incident, Titus knocked on her door.

"Go away." She grabbed Crookshanks and held him close for comfort. Her cat meowed in annoyance.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go to Diagon Alley with me."

Oh, it hurt. She wanted to go more than anything in the world.

"No."

"I know you've been bored, especially on the weekends. Don't do this to yourself just because you're angry with me. And... I miss you."

"I don't want to spend time with you."

He thumped the door with his fist.

"You do realise you're angry with me for a situation *you* put yourself in. How did you expect me to respond? I should have gutted Malfoy. I'm still tempted. And do you know what I should have done after discovering you were taking illegal books from a member of the Order? You've been rebelling for no fucking reason, and then you get angry when I don't even punish you for it. Merlin, I don't know what to do with you." He paused. "Can you just come out? I hate talking to the door."

"No."

"Fine! Stay in there all day, but don't complain that you don't get to go out when I've offered."

She cuddled Crookshanks so hard, he hissed at her.

---

Two weeks later, she sat in the middle of the treehouse with the other muggleborns. They had a circle of candles around them. The others were attempting wandless magic with no success. She tried to explain how it felt in her body when she made it happen.

"It buzzes under your skin. Don't you feel it?"

"Sort of," Finch said. Beside him, Dean grit his teeth in total concentration. "But it just won't do what I'm thinking."

"Concentrate on forcing it into your hands, and then concentrate on pushing it out. Think of it as a part of you— like an arm."

Sweat beaded on Dean's forehead, but nothing happened.

Julie had managed to put out a candle several days before, surprisingly more adept at magic than the others. Katie didn't have the patience, not even bothering with trying.

"You're wasting your time," Katie said when Finch gave a frustrated noise after another failure. "You could be learning new spells."

Hermione nibbled her lip in indecision. Her thoughts went to the book she kept under her floorboards— the skin bound book.

When she'd opened it the first time, a wave of darkness washed over her, soaking into her skin, making her feel ill. She considered burning it then, but every time she thought of throwing it out, she remembered Titus demanding her books.

Despite her initial aversion, it fascinated her, though it was written in runic language she couldn't read. And without access to the older runic languages to translate, she was left wondering what it contained. She suspected it was so old it didn't have spells, but rituals, based on blood magic and wandless incantations.

Hermione decided to keep it a secret, but she didn't want to keep *everything* secret.

"I've learned three new spells," Hermione interrupted her friends. She waited for all of their attention to be on her before speaking. "They're so terrible they're labelled *unforgivable*. Before the war, the use of them earned a person Azkaban. I'm not sure what the punishment is now. Though, I assume it's still illegal for the most part."

"Why would we need to know about them if they're so evil?" Julie asked.

"Because it's the absolute *last* type of magic they'd want you to learn." Hermione was unable to hide the bitter undertones in her voice. "Every wizard or witch you've ever met knows about them, secrets passed on through schools like Hogwarts. I don't know about you, but I'm finished with being denied magic, no matter the type."

The treehouse went silent. They were a coven of muggleborns with wands, but what use were the wands without the knowledge of magic? Dark or light, it didn't matter to Hermione. She wanted it all.

"What are they?" Dean asked.

"The first is called Imperio. It makes you lose your free will. If cast correctly, you're a puppet to the wizard who cast it."

"Is there any way to fight it?"

"Not really. From what I've read, there are cases where the victim dismantled it by sheer willpower, but those cases are few."

"What's the second?" Julie asked. Though scared, she started to look interested.

"The second is called Crucio." Even the word made her shiver. She remembered the frightful shadows crossing Titus' face, and Blaise contorting in pain. "It's a torture curse. The worst pain you could ever feel, and it can last for as long as the wizard can hold the spell."

"And the last?" Katie asked.

"Avada Kedavra." Hermione glanced around at her friends. She now knew it was what Lucius used in Knockturn Alley to kill the filthy man. "The Death Curse."

"My mum cast that once." Julie fidgeted with her necklace. "A man tried to grab me in Diagon Alley when I was seven. There was a green light, and the man fell over. I didn't see much else, because she apparated us away."

"You never told us that," Katie said. They'd been with each other for so long they could list each other's life stories. Every internal and external pain. Their hopes and dreams and desires. It was rare to learn something new.

"I'd forgotten. Hermione saying the name jolted the memory somehow."

"Well, what's the use of learning the unforgivables, if we can't practise casting? I doubt I could throw an Avada around to see if it works." Dean stared into the candle flame with a hand outstretched, a part of him still attempting to snuff it out with wandless magic.

"Because they don't have specific wand movements. At least, not from what I've read. They are closer to old magic than the spells we've learned."

"How so?"

"There's only one trick for the curse to work, which is why it's hard for most wizards to attain." Hermione stopped and glanced around at them, wondering if she was making a mistake. But they needed to be able to protect themselves, and they couldn't always rely on another wizard to help them. "You have to *mean it*."

"Slavery, torture, and death," Dean said with a scoff. "You'd need to be practically evil to mean any of those."

"Unless it's in self defence," Julie added.

"Even in self defence, you need to mean it," Hermione warned. "Most people find it impossible to wish death, even if the person deserves it. And it extracts a price from your soul. Dark magic lingers."

For some reason, a chill ran up her spine. A thought came to her then, reminding her of another spell that might be useful to their little coven.

"I do have something we can practise." Hermione took out her own wand. "The charm creates a spirit guardian, born of good thoughts, which can drive away Dementors and Lethifolds, and it's the only charm that can scare away a manticore—though it won't be able to defeat it. It took me ages to master it, but a few days ago, I managed to produce it. After I show you, I can teach you."

The group perked up, glad to be diverted from thoughts of slavery, torture, and death.

Hermione darkened the room for effect, then she raised her wand and muttered, "Expecto Patronum."

A string of brilliant light burst from the tip of her wand, and in the corner of a treehouse her patronus emerged. A silver otter bounced and played.

"How adorable." Julie clasped her hands together and gave a squeal of excitement. "Teach it to me first!"

---

Three days later, Hermione heard a pop when she was in the library. She stood up, wondering who it could be, since she wasn't expecting anyone.

The back of her neck prickled. She pulled her wand out of her purse, holding it low, reciting defensive spells in her mind. She edged along the wall, twisting around the corners. When

she got closer to the main living room connected to the foyer, she heard the sound of breaking glass. A grunt. A groan.

Hermione jumped out, wand ready, and then pulled back.

Titus was draped across a couch, holding his stomach. Blood puddled on the couch below him, crimson dripping down his fingers. He acknowledged her with a grunt of pain.

"Oh, Merlin." Hermione rushed forward and crouched down in front of him. "Why didn't you go to St. Mungo's?"

"I—I thought I'd splinch." He said the words through clenched teeth.

Hermione tried to get him to the floo, but he tumbled over, almost unconscious. She levitated him, but at the entrance to the floo she hesitated, knowing she couldn't be seen using magic in public. Hermione bit her lip and lowered Titus.

"Sprite," he called out in agony when his body met the ground. His hand fell away, showing his exposed wound. Hermione put a hand to her lips, almost vomiting. Parts of his insides—intestines, probably—were visible, pushing out through the cut on his abdomen.

"I'm here," Hermione answered with a shaky voice.

She grabbed some floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. It roared to life.

"St. Mungo's," she said, and then she grabbed the top of his robes near his shoulders and pulled with all her might. Titus was tall and muscular, so she struggled with his weight, knowing each additional second could mean life or death, but finally, with one last tug, she managed to get through.

---

St. Mungo's was bursting with activity. Whatever happened, several aurors and multiple citizens must have been injured. Dozens of Healers rushed around with men and women floating behind them. One had horrible burns down both arms. Another had a section of their face blown off, looking already dead.

"Help!" She cried. But no one could hear her. The chaos was too great.

She grabbed the next healer by the robes and swung the woman around to help her.

"This is Titus Nott! If you don't save him right now, he'll die."

The healer's eyes widened, recognizing Titus. Without waiting, she levitated him. He was unconscious, arms hanging limp at his side, blood dripping steadily against the floor. It left a trail as the healer hurried away.

Hermione stared at the blood splatters on the ground. The adrenaline caught up to her as she pressed herself to the wall, shivering in terror.

Another scream roused her from her fear. She looked up to see a beautiful woman with dark skin and a crown of tiny braids, clutching a injured child to her chest.

Like they did her, no one seemed to be paying attention to the mother in the panic. Hermione jumped into action, rushing forward. The child's head was covered in blood, and his arm looked mangled.

"We need to stop the bleeding," Hermione said. She didn't know much about first aid, but she did know wounds needed pressure. The woman looked at her, eyes blown wide with fear. Hermione took off her over robe, and using the sleeves, she tightened it around the boy's arm. It didn't do much. The boy needed real help and soon.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, trying to distract the mother.

"An attack on the ministry," the woman said through tears. "I was visiting to bring lunch to Thorfinn, but the Order arrived. There was a battle with the aurors, and then an explosion."

A healer finally noticed them, bustling over.

"Oh, you poor dear," the older woman said. "Give him to me. Children take priority."

The woman and child were whisked away, leaving Hermione alone, with nothing but her thoughts. It took until the woman disappeared to realise that she'd interacted with a breeder—a muggleborn with a child.

Without something to do, Hermione's fear returned. The reality shifted through her:

That was Titus' blood on the ground.

His organs were exposed.

He could die.

And one of the last things she would have said to him was that she didn't want to spend time with him. She buried her head in her hands and slid to the floor, knees up, face down.

*Titus could die.*

It was all she could think about. The fear made a loop in her mind, spikes of it pulling her into a dark pit. She sat there, attempting to get lost in her own darkness, unwilling to look up until she felt a hand on her head.

"Hermione?" Theo's voice was raw.

She stood up and fell into her brother's arms. Theo cried against her shoulder, and for the first time since childhood, a tear escaped and trailed down her cheek.

---

Hermione curled up in a chair near Titus' hospital bed. She hadn't left for days, except when Tabitha forced her home to eat and shower.

At the moment, Theo stood next to his brother's bed, staring at his steadily rising and falling chest, as if scared it might somehow stop.

"The healer said he should wake up soon," Hermione said, voice stripped of emotion.

Theo sighed.

"I can't face him right now. These past few months have been torture, but I— Harry refuses to answer my owls. He's dropped out of school, and I have no idea where he is. Ron's missing too. There's a terrible rumour they've joined the Order, but I refuse to believe it." He was silent for a moment, frowning. "I never told you, but I loved him... and not just as a friend. Though I guess none of that matters now."

Hermione had suspected that for a long time, and she understood his anger toward his brother.

But her own anger died to embers with the threat of his death. She'd been so stupid and selfish. She knew what he'd told her was true and that all of his actions were to protect her. She still didn't like the rules or agree with them, but she couldn't fault Titus for enforcing them.

"Give Harry time. He must understand it wasn't you."

Even to her ears, it sounded false.

Theo shook his head and glanced at his brother with all the hurt and love he possessed. He seemed older, as if inside the length of a few weeks he'd transformed from a child into a man. He was still much too thin, but his jaw had dark scruff, and he held himself with a more serious countenance than before.

"When Titus wakes, tell him—" He sucked in a breath. "Tell him that I love him, and that I'll probably forgive him in time."

"I'll tell him."

Theo gave a nod in her direction.

"Goodnight, Hermione."

"Goodnight."

When he walked out, Hermione got up and crawled into the hospital bed next to Titus. She arranged his arms so that she could lay her head on his chest and let his steady heartbeat comfort her.

---

She awoke when Titus lifted her hand from his chest. He stared at it much like Draco had in the glade, as if to read her future.

"You saved me," he whispered, lips close to the top of her head.



"Of course, I did. Why wouldn't I?"

"I'm not sure of anything anymore." He sighed.

"Who did this?"

His free hand stroked down her arm. His heart beat steadily under her ear, gaining pace the longer she talked to him.

"A rat in our ranks. We were in the process of transporting Thibodeaux, when the Order attacked, and an auror tried to curse me in the back. I managed to discover the betrayal last minute, though not fast enough. The curse slit my stomach. I tried to suture it, but it must have been dark magic, because it kept reopening." He kissed the top of her head, lingering and taking a deep breath. "I thought I would die... and I could only think of you."

"Me?"

"I worried about what would happen to you if I died. Theo wouldn't have the knowledge of politics to keep you safe." He lifted his wrist. "I think your protection rune worked. That curse should have killed me. It's my lucky charm."

"What happened to my— to Thibodeaux?"

Titus stiffened under her, and then his body relaxed again.

"The Order managed to rescue him. I know you probably feel relieved he's still alive, but I don't want to hear it. Not today."

Again, the guilt overwhelmed her. If she hadn't taken the books, none of this would have happened. Hermione choked her tears back before they could fall.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I disobeyed, and—"

"It doesn't matter anymore." He hesitated when she placed her hand on the upper part of his chest, muscles tensing under her touch. "I understand you've been struggling, but you need to communicate with me. Tell me what you want and need. I'll provide everything that you think might help make home comfortable for you. I want you to be happy."

He tried to make her feel better, but the thought of the isolation in the manor with just Titus, Tabitha, and occasionally Theo for company made her stomach twist in dread.

She tried to be happy with her circumstances, but she knew deep down nothing could go back to what it had been. She'd never noticed the bars of her cage before, and now they gleamed bright in the dark, no longer feeling benevolent. No longer feeling like protection.

"Do you still hate me?" he whispered. It sounded more vulnerable than she'd ever heard him.

She shook her head.

"I can't hate you."

He tugged her into a tighter hold and kissed the top of her head again. They rested in silence, while she listened to the steady thump of his heart.

# Chapter 19: A Black Galleon

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Chase Holfelder- "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (Cyndi Lauper cover) (Major to Minor) ... This song actually inspired the last five or so chapters in this story. I love the way the cover turns the lyrics into something more sinister.

All the kudos go to my beta, MyPrivateInsanity

## A Black Galleon

Hermione tried to be content with her life, but it had become monotonous—a nonstop repetition of school days with her friends and the occasional moment with Titus when he had the time for her. In January, Tabitha's family member fell ill, so she moved away to help her, leaving Hermione with no one to talk to most of the days.

Titus worked odd hours, gone before she woke up and coming home long after it was dark. At night, he'd hover in her doorway while she pretended to sleep. She felt his eyes on her back, examining her as if trying to solve a complicated puzzle.

On the weekends, she wandered around the manor, wondering if she resembled a ghost. She'd go to his mother's sitting room to stare at the painting of the ballerina, and then she'd scream in her frustration.

What would she do when her friends left? Katie started her Trials after Easter. Julie would be gone by December, and the boys left in the fall. By Christmas, she'd be alone. When Theo had entered Hogwarts, she had thought she'd been lonely, but it was nothing compared to the present. She felt as if she were surrounded by an empty ocean, struggling to stay afloat as dark clouds cast shadows over her life.

She wished to do something or be something— a dragon rider, a curse breaker. She envisioned scenarios in her head of sitting in the Wizengamot with her own purple robes. Why couldn't she work *and* have children? It still made no sense to her why they suppressed her magic.

Unless— like Viktor suggested— they were afraid of her magic. But why would someone as strong as Titus be afraid of her magic?

Instead of learning to be happy, she swallowed her bitterness.

One day, Titus came home early.

"How was your day?" he asked at dinner. It was Sunday. She'd spent two days just walking the gardens and reading books she'd already read, talking out loud to have a semblance of a conversation.

She shrugged at the question, making a noncommittal noise at the back of her throat.

He stared at her as she cut her chicken into miniscule bites.

"I was thinking about getting you a tutor for activities to fill your time on the weekends when I'm not here. Dance, maybe? I know how much you like to look at the paintings in my mother's sitting room."

That wasn't why she stared at them, but she didn't say anything.

"Sure," she said.

"You don't sound very enthused."

"I just—" she sighed. "I'm not very interested in dance."

"Alright," he said. "What about art lessons?"

She couldn't stop her grimace. It peeked through without her permission.

"I see that's a no as well." He set down his fork and rested his chin in his hand, while she still refused to look at him. "I need you to help me with this." He straightened and ran a hand through his hair. "I see you're unhappy. It distresses me. Staying at the manor used to never bother you. What changed?"

"I grew up," she said without thinking. Her emotions seemed to be slipping out of her whether she willed it or not. "I need more."

"What do you need more of?"

"I'm not sure."

She didn't know if she could put the feeling into words, the gnawing void in her chest. The need for excitement. Adventure. Purpose. And *not* a purpose that involved providing something for someone else. A real purpose, crafted only for her.

"That's entirely unhelpful." Titus tilted his head, as if in deep thought. "I think I'll invest in some horses. You love the outdoors, and I think taking care of the animals would benefit you."

She gave a sharp nod, attempting to hide her profound disappointment. She'd accept the diversion, but Hermione didn't know how much longer she could go on like this.

They ate the rest of the meal in silence, as Hermione tried to bury her deep unhappiness, while Titus tore apart her expression, uncovering it anyway.

---

"We're not fourteen, wandering off into Knockturn Alley for some giggles." Theo's voice still had a bite to it when talking to his brother.

Titus sat in his office with the ancient desk in front of him. A few case files perched on the edge, and it took everything inside her not to indulge in curiosity and try to read them. Titus would know if she did though, and then he'd ban her from going out with Theo. And if she didn't get out of the manor soon, she'd surely descend into insanity.

"The Order is—"

"We'll be in the middle of Diagon Alley." Theo's eyes landed on Hermione. "Have you even let her out of the manor since Christmas?"

Titus scowled. "Of course, I have." But he flinched, knowing the truth just as well as she did.

He'd brought her out only three times. Once to Diagon Alley. Once on a trip to the LeStrange household. And once to Hogsmeade—though not when Hogwarts students were visiting.

Titus stared at her hard.

*Please*, she mouthed to him. He didn't trust Theo to watch her any more. Not with both the Malfoy and Zabini incidents he knew about. But he must see her desperation, because he let out a long sigh.

"Fine," he said. "But eyes on her *at all times*. I want to see the pre-approved list of places you will visit, and I'm going to send an auror to follow you."

He hated relying on aurors after Garner tried to kidnap her. Titus only trusted himself, which meant she rarely got out, because he never had the time to bring her places. The fact he was letting her go with Theo was a big step.

Hermione walked over and gave him a hug. His stiff shoulders loosened at her touch, and he dragged her close, hands around her waist, face in her hair.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't make me regret it."

"I won't."

"No pranks, thievery, or running away into abandoned alleys."

"Promise."

She kissed his cheek. The dark scruff on his cheek tickled her lips, and Titus' hands tightened along her back, as if he wanted to keep her there forever.

---

Hermione almost danced down the street. She'd never seen such a perfect day. Morning showers had wet the cobblestones, but the sunshine peeked out from behind the clouds.

Hermione turned her face up, welcoming both the rain and the sun, wishing to be cleansed.

Her hands shook in her excitement, looking at all the people walking around her. Hermione wondered what it would be like to go to Diagon Alley whenever she wished without anyone accompanying her. No aurors trailing behind— not even with Theo— just walking by herself while meandering through the crowds on a summer day.

She sighed. They'd already bought books and ate lunch, and she feared their outing might be ending soon.

"Let's go get you some clothes," Theo suggested.

"I already bought new ones a few weeks ago."

"I insist. We might as well. What else is there to do?"

They took their time walking to Madam Malkins. Hermione wasn't in a hurry, enjoying the pleasant stroll. She watched the people around her as they laughed with their families, oblivious to her stares. The rare children giggled and played. The younger ones were held in the arms of a breeder or nanny, always alongside the wizard who claimed them or an auror.

Hermione followed Theo inside the shop as a bell signalled their entrance. A fat tom cat lazed next to the windowsill. Behind the counter, she could see a room filled with bolts of fabric in every colour and texture.

It took a few moments before the attendant arrived. She had a magical measuring tape in one hand and a sewing needle clenched in her teeth.

When she saw them, her eyes widened. She took out the needle and set down her measuring tape.

"Can I help you?" She sounded a little nervous.

"We were curious to see your newest dresses. I heard you had a new fabric made of acromantula spidersilk."

"Yes, of course, right this way. Follow me, Miss..."

"Hermione."

"Follow me, Miss Hermione. Mr. Nott can wait for you in the front while we proceed to the fitting room. Most of our newest displays are still in the back. "

Hermione glanced behind her, finding the woman's behaviour a little off. Theo had both his hands tucked into his pockets, and he gave a nod for her to continue.

How odd.

She walked behind the petite woman. She hadn't visited Madam Malkins much. Most of the time, someone came to the manor for her measurements, and then she ordered the clothes she

liked in catalogues from Paris. Titus rarely spent his money at Madam Malkins, finding it too pedestrian.

Hermione entered the fitting room. Dark curtains lined the room in a circle. There was a raised dais in the centre for measurements and a long mirror in the corner.

"I didn't pick out—"

Hermione turned to find the attendant gone, and in her place stood a grinning Draco Malfoy.

Hermione took a step back in surprise.

"What are you doing here?"

"Didn't I promise that I'd find a way to see you again?"

He'd grown since the last time she'd seen him, towering over her, about the same height as Titus. He wore his hair parted on the side and combed in an attractive style. His broad shoulders were filled out more with muscle, jawline cut like marble, only offset by natural full lips. He resembled a man now, though if she looked close, she could see youth clinging to him.

She'd forgotten how attractive he was. And somehow in his absence, he'd become more so. It almost hurt to look at him.

Her whole chest swelled and then deflated. In December, she'd have been ecstatic to see the irritating prat— ecstatic about the potential rule breaking—but today she had too much to lose. And he did too. If Titus discovered she'd been alone with Malfoy again, he might not hold back. She imagined his pale body without a hand or lips, face scarred, beauty destroyed.

"I can't see you," Hermione said.

"What do you mean?"

"Titus forbids it. He—he found out about us. Right now, he only thinks we've kissed. I can't let him discover any more."

"How did he find out?"

Hermione could tell Malfoy the truth, but she remembered the way he'd marched forward with his wand to Zabini's forehead, telling him in a casual voice to crawl into a grave. Hermione suspected that Draco hadn't been bluffing with his threats.

Titus could possibly get away with murdering Blaise.

But could Draco?

"I don't know," Hermione answered. "He just found out."

Draco narrowed his eyes but didn't say anything

"I guess that's why he sent back my letter without giving it to you."

She'd worried endlessly that Titus would retaliate against Draco with violence. She still believed he would, probably waiting for the correct opportunity.

"I'm not scared of Titus."

"You *really* should be."

Her current dilemma: the only route to leave was behind Draco.

"Let me out."

Draco crossed his arms.

"Not yet. I had to use several bribes to get you here, and I'm not about to waste it because you've suddenly grown irrational."

Now it was Hermione's turn to narrow her eyes.

"It's not irrational. You don't know—he cut off someone's fingers!"

"Titus won't do anything to me, and we won't get caught."

Draco was cocky. Too cocky. Hermione feared it might bite him one day. He didn't know Titus like she did.

"At least one of us needs to be sensible. And that's clearly not you, so get out of my way."

She walked forward, intent on passing by him, but he grabbed her by the shoulders, yanked her up on the dais and twisted her around to view the mirror. He loomed behind her.

"You're going to stay right here until we talk this out." His grey eyes pierced her, and his hold loosened on her upper arm into something soft.

"Look, even if you're right, and he doesn't hurt you, he'd still lock me away again." Hermione tried to reason with him. "This is one of the first times I've been out of the manor since Christmas, and I can't mess it up."

Draco's expression was one she'd only seen him give to Blaise—a glare that promised danger. He tipped his chin down, eyes darkening with shadows.

"What the fuck do you mean?" His hands once again tightened on her shoulders.

"Exactly what I said. This is my first true excursion since Christmas."

He placed his lips close to her ear, while he stared at her in the mirror.

"Just hold strong until you want to start the Trials," he said. "Because then I'm going to set you free. You'll never be locked away again. No one will tell you what to do under my roof, not even me."



His lips brushed against the skin under her ear— a gentle kiss— and she groaned out loud, unable to hide the way the words tempted her. She held an agonising hope of a life without rules, and he dangled it in front of her like gold to a dragon.

She didn't believe him, but she closed her eyes, tilting her head to the side so he could taste her skin, and allowed herself to play pretend. His hands slid down her shoulders, tracing her hips, and bunched the fabric of her dress at her side.

"I plan to spoil you." He smiled against her throat. "The whole world will be yours to do with as you please. You'll be a queen."

She should stop his blatant, manipulative lies. Instead, she watched in the mirror as he lifted the voluminous fabric up, until it exposed her knees, then her thighs, and then her knickers. She wished she'd picked out a prettier pair, but Draco didn't seem to care. He panted against her neck at the sight of her bare skin, and she felt the heat of his hand as it entered the waistband of her knickers, dipping down.

"Tell me, Granger." He gave a pressured stroke along her clit and placed his lips against the shell of her ear. His other hand grabbed her throat, keeping her in a possessive hold pressed tight to him. "Tell me what you *want*."

His calloused fingers touched her with more confidence than the last time, and liquid heat pooled in her abdomen as he teased her. It was hard to think, but she was able to clear her head enough to shudder out a reply.

"Books—I want books."

"When school ends, we'll meet again, and I'll give you a whole stack."

Hermione groaned at his promise. His movements weren't perfect, sometimes brushing the wrong spot, but the fire burned so hot inside her, she didn't care.

More. She wanted more and more and more. She'd take whatever he gave her. A new dream arose in her built on his seductive lies.

"Books on the dark arts," she amended, testing him.

"Of course." His hand slipped further into her knickers, and he pressed two fingers inside her. When he moved, the palm of his hand rubbed against her clit, causing her to gasp.

"Right there," she demanded, grabbing his wrist to keep it in place, while she rocked forward, chasing her own pleasure. They looked obscene in the mirror, and she watched her own expression as she lost all sense of time and space, except for the pressure on her clit while his fingers filled her. She concentrated on his stare in the mirror, on his mercury eyes, pupils blown with lust.

Her head tried to tilt up to the ceiling in bliss, but the hand on her throat snapped up and grabbed her jaw, tugging her face so she looked back into the mirror.

"I want to see you."

"Malfoy," she groaned.

"Say that again."

"Malfoy," she cried out, and while leaning against him, she came on his hand. Her cheeks felt hot as her hips rolled into him.

When her orgasm finally ebbed, she was left boneless and panting, standing only with his support. Malfoy's hand slipped out of her knickers. She watched as he placed the wet fingers to his mouth, tasting her with a wicked grin.

"Besides the dark arts, what subjects do you want?"

Her brain felt like cotton, but the thought of books snapped her back to reality.

"Ancient Runes—focusing on older runic languages, to be specific. Maybe a few about obscure potions."

"Your wish is my command. I'll even bring a concealment bag that will make it easier to keep them hidden from Titus. It's an old family relic able to transfer objects across wards, though it can't transfer back and forth anything bigger than the bag, and it can't send anything living. I doubt even Titus would know about it. After you finish reading, you can send them back and highlight anything that you feel needs more explanation."

Hermione was still breathing hard, attempting to regain her equilibrium.

"Why are you okay with me learning?"

Draco paused and then pressed forward. The hard lines of his chest lined up against her back, and she felt his hard erection along her arse. She withheld the sudden gasp that wanted to exit.

"The sight of you using wandless magic hasn't left my mind. Why would I want to extinguish that?"

Hermione shivered under his heavy hands. Titus always tried to control her power, but if Draco was to be believed, he'd like to unleash it.

"What if I wanted an owl?"

He let her skirt fall and helped straighten it with a few tugs.

"When I promise anything, I mean *anything*. Make a list of everything you want in life. And don't be shy about it. Give me the most absurd things to do, see, or have. There are no limitations."

What bullshit. But the words were so pretty.

"The rules—"

"How many times do I have to tell you that the rules don't apply to me?"

Of course, they didn't.

Her heart beat funny under her ribs, to a tune she did not order. She didn't want to picture a future with Malfoy. She didn't want to hope for freedom.

Because if she didn't get it, the death of the dream might destroy her.

"I have a question."

"Hmm?" His fingers were crawling along the fabric of her dress again, feeling the outline of her body, skating over her curves.

"After the Trials—" she gasped when his hand reached up and cupped her breast, rolling his thumb across the thin fabric. Her nipples hardened under his touch. It almost distracted her. "After the Trials is there a ritual?"

"A ritual?"

Hermione nodded.

He pulled his hands back, considering her question.

"There's a binding spell. I'm not sure if it's given to every muggleborn, but every Malfoy bride has had one, and even though we won't be married, I doubt my father will let you be the exception."

"What does the binding spell do?"

"It prevents anyone from getting you pregnant except for me."

"That— makes sense, I guess. Is that all? I've heard rumours that it might be something else."

"Not that I've heard." His wicked expression had dropped into something pensive. "I can ask my father, if you want. He's been to several Trials, so he knows the routine. From what I know, after I win you, I can just— take you home."

The worry that had coiled around her heart for years slowly loosened. What Draco described didn't sound so bad. Lucius must have been referencing the binding spell. Maybe the women kicked and screamed on their way to their new home. The idea still made her ill, but it was better than what her brain imagined.

"I'll need to be leaving soon, or someone might get suspicious."

He snorted against her skin.

"Do you ever stop worrying?" He asked.

"Do you ever worry enough?"

"Not when I don't need to." He let his tongue run down her neck—stealing one last taste—and she felt the desire peak in her again. "Later, Granger. Be sure to masturbate to the thought of me again."

"Egotistical little—ugh, as if I'd—"

She twisted to shove him again for his audacity, but by the time she'd turned, he'd already given one last kiss to her cheek, a quick pat her arse, and then vanished out of the fitting room, leaving her reeling and alone.

---

Theo stopped her before exiting, looking her over. Her cheeks must still be flushed, though she attempted to cool herself down and erase all traces. By his expression, she failed at her task.

"I hope you're being careful," he said.

Her blush returned.

"Of course, I am."

He shook his head.

"I'll go ahead and order several dresses to make the cover real. The auror that Titus sent is stationed outside. He wants us to go back. Supposedly, there was a tip that Order members might be close. They're closing down all of Diagon Alley."

The thought of returning to the manor made her heart sink, but she pushed aside her dismay. She didn't want another attempted kidnapping.

They exited Madam Malkins. The day, once bright, descended into darkness as clouds gathered. Already, the air felt heavy and wet below the storm clouds.

"Apparation and floos are deactivated while we're patrolling the streets." The auror hurried them along. "I've been told to take you to the Leaky. The floo works from there and only there."

The crowd was thinner than before, absent of children. Everyone walked as if on a mission, head tucked down, eyes to the ground. Some people glanced furtively around as if monsters would pop out from the corner. Another auror joined them, standing on either side of her and Theo as they led them through the streets.

Hermione hurried along with them as Theo clutched her hand.

A man collided with her back, almost knocking her off her feet, but Theo had been clutching her arm like a life raft. A small piece of paper slipped into her left hand, and on instinct, she clutched it. Somehow, she managed to hold onto it while being jostled around.

She rightened herself as the aurors lunged and tackled the man to the ground.

"I'm sorry!" The man struggled to get away with both his hands up. "I didn't mean to." He trembled as the giant aurors levelled their wands in his face and proceeded to pat him down. "I promise," he pleaded. "I just wasn't looking where I was going."

Hermione should out him. The paper burned in her hand, but she crumpled it further.

The aurors searched him thoroughly, and only when they didn't find anything did they let him scramble up and give him back his wand.

"Next time, look where you're going," the auror spat. The man gulped and nodded without looking at her. "We'll remember your face."

The man scurried away. Hermione resisted the desire to stare.

"Are you all right?" One of the aurors asked her. "Did he hurt you? We can track him down for sufficient punishment if he did. Titus would kill us if you arrived with a single bruise."

She didn't know if he was exaggerating.

"No, I'm perfectly fine. Not a scratch." She let them examine her.

After being convinced she wasn't harmed, they began walking again. Hermione stashed the note into her pocket to look at later.

---

Two days later, Katie hugged her tight. If Hermione could cry, she'd be weeping.

"It'll be okay," Katie said, though there was a quiver in her voice. "Marcus isn't so bad. He kissed me a few weeks ago, and it wasn't terrible at all. All I need to do is knock out his teeth, so he can regrow them better, and I think he'd be rather handsome. His only true flaw is his taste in quidditch teams, but I plan to convince him of the merits of Puddlemere United. I refuse to raise my children as Falmouth Falcons fans."

Hermione tried to laugh at the way Katie attempted to lighten her fears, but her friend trembled in her arms.

Julie and the boys had left a few hours earlier, and Titus had allowed Katie to stay longer. Since then, they'd sat in the treehouse, talking about their future. Her friend looked around as if saying goodbye to her childhood.

"Are you scared?" Hermione asked.

"I'd be lying if I said no," she admitted. "I'm not looking forward to sex. My mistress warned me that the first time can hurt pretty bad."

"It can?" Hermione asked. No one had told her that. No one had told her anything, besides Katie, and Hermione wasn't sure how much to trust her knowledge. "Why would anyone want to do it if it hurts?"

Katie shrugged.

"Maybe witches and wizards only do it enough to get pregnant."

As always, Hermione understood there was a lot she didn't know, giant gaps that she struggled to fill. Maybe she should have asked Draco, if she hadn't been so distracted by his wandering hands.

Based on the women Titus brought over, and the noises they made, she doubted people only had sex for children. It must be pleasurable in some way. And the way Draco talked about sex made it seem fun. Maybe Katie was wrong about it hurting. The other things they did certainly never hurt her.

Hermione let go of her friend and dug inside her purse. She extracted a gleaming galleon.

"I charmed it," Hermione explained. "I wanted to make it send messages, so we could still talk, but that was more advanced magic and in books I couldn't access, though I know it's possible." She reached out and grabbed her friend's hand, putting the galleon inside her palm and closing it. "But I did manage to charm it to show your mood. If you want to see how I'm feeling, just close your fist around it and think of me."

Katie did as she asked, and then her eyes widened.

"It's warm."

"Yes, look at it."

Katie opened her palm, and the once golden galleon now glowed a faint blue.

"What does it mean?"

"I'm sad," Hermione said. "If it's green, it means I'm happy. If it's yellow, it means I'm sick. If it's red, it means I'm angry." Hermione hesitated. "And if it's black, it means I'm in intense pain, whether that's physical or emotional. It unfortunately reads the same for each. It was the best I could do. Maybe by the time the boys leave, I'll have made one that sends messages, and they can hand one off to you."

Katie's eyes glistened as she took in the old artwork tacked on the wall. The bugs in the terrariums. The small bookcase, now empty. The candles from their last practice still rested in a circle.

"I'll miss this." Like her, Katie wasn't one to weep, but Hermione understood she was close. "Maybe once you go through the Trials, Marcus will let me come back. We could have lessons and play quidditch games forever."

Hermione nodded, but even she didn't believe the lie. After the Trials, Katie might be pregnant. Muggleborns were expected to take care of the babies. Going off to school and hanging out with friends every day wouldn't be allowed. Today Katie was saying goodbye to *everything*—her whole world and all of her routines. When she left, there would be a giant hole in Hermione's life, one she couldn't fill with horses or dancing or art, no matter how much Titus tried.

"I can't wait to see you again," Katie said, stuffing the galleon in her pocket.

The words hurtled her back to when Theo left for school. It had been forever then, and it would be forever now—a swift, irreversible change in her life. Nothing could soften that cold truth.

Hermione waited until Katie left—after more hugs and false promises— before she let the depression drown her.

---

**If you need help, come to Bromley House Library, Nottingham.**

It said nothing else. But the words were bold and dangerous.

The note was sent by the Order. Even without a signature, she understood this. She should burn it, but every time her palm hovered over the fireplace, she hesitated.

Hermione didn't understand why she kept it. It's not like she'd ever leave. Not to mention, if she ever did run away, it wouldn't be to a terrorist group.

Though she'd be lying If she didn't consider the idea for a second, especially as the manor's walls closed in. Garner's words from deep in her past still haunted her. *We'll get you a wand, and we'll train you how to use it.*

She should still burn it, but she feared she'd forget what it said. Instead, she charmed it to look like a common piece of parchment and hid it under her floorboards, shoved inside the skin bound book.

The method they used to give her the note bothered her too. It resembled the way Dean initiated contact with Ollivander, and it made Hermione question whether the wandmaker was a part of the Order. It could be a coincidence, but she didn't think it was.

Hermione collapsed back into a chair. She'd been pacing for hours, knowing the first day of Katie's Trial was almost over. Titus was on the board of four judges, so she waited by the floo for him to come back, attempting to calm her worry. So far nothing had worked. Her heart beat hard and painful in her chest no matter what book she tried to read to distract herself.

If everything went to plan, Flint would win the first two Trials, and it would be done.

It went later than she expected. Hermione couldn't pry her eyes away from the hands inching along the white frame of the clock on the mantelpiece, turning in a never-ending circle.

Several hours past midnight, Titus arrived home. He had on his formal Death Eater robes, black mask in place, hiding his expression.

Hermione sprung from the couch and ran to him. When she got close, he opened his arms, and she fell into the offered comfort. The cold mask pressed against the top of her head.

"Tell me," she said.

"Flint won the first two trials. It's over."

Hermione let out a deep breath and sagged against him.

As much as she didn't like Flint, and as much as she didn't agree with the way he won—paying his way in—it was a relief to know everything was settled. Katie belonged to Flint.

"Is Greg all right?"

Titus hesitated.

"His father didn't allow him to attend or say goodbye. It was for the best. I'm sure Flint will let him visit soon enough." He squeezed her harder. "It won't be too long before you get to see her too. She's not gone forever."

Hermione wondered why they didn't allow breeders to interact with unclaimed muggleborns. Again, Hermione felt like she missed something important.

"Go get some sleep, Sprite. There's no need to worry for your friend. Flint will treat her right. I had a talk with him after the Trials."

"What do you mean?" Hermione pulled back and looked up at him. Sad blue eyes looked back down on her.

"I made sure to remind him of his responsibilities to Katie. He seems to care for her already, but the adjustment might be hard. She has a strong spirit like you do, so he needs to be patient."

Hermione reached up and took off his mask. His face looked a little red and sweaty, but he didn't stop her. She stood on her tip toes and placed a light kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you for looking out for her."

He placed his hand on her cheek and let it linger, brushing the edge of her jaw with his gloved thumb, and then he leaned down and kissed her forehead for a little longer than usual.

"Promise me you won't worry any more."

"Promise."

---

She broke her promise soon after.

Later, in her bed, she pulled out the galleon connected to Katie's. She'd forced herself not to check earlier, knowing it would only make her spare, but she didn't stop herself this time from wrapping her hand tight around the galleon.

*Katie*, her mind whispered, focusing all her thoughts on her friend until it warmed her palm.

Hermione opened her fingers.



The galleon was solid black.

# Chapter 20: Doppelgänger

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Emmit Fenn- "Woman"

A/N: One of my wonderful readers created a discord for House Pet to discuss the fic. It's Titus-based, for those of you who want more of him. The server is called Butcher Bae (which the name is perfection, by the way lol). The only rules are to be respectful and no ship-shaming.

<https://discord.gg/NE2u52aj> (That should work. Tell me if it doesn't)

Edited to add: This is a dark story with dark themes. This was all very much foreshadowed, and it won't be the only fucked up thing to happen in this fic. So while this chapter might be shocking, I'll ask that you be respectful in the comment section, whether that's directed to me or to other readers. Thank you. No one was disrespectful yet, but past comment sections have gotten heated for less lol.

A big thank you to my wonderful editor, MyPrivateInsanity.

Trigger warning posted at the end.

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

## Doppelgänger

Hermione obsessively checked the galleon, whispering Katie's name in the dark. It stayed black for a day, and then it turned a bright blue.

Hermione almost wept at the change, wishing to talk to her. It was torture not knowing what was wrong or how to fix it.

After that, there were three weeks of blue. Depression, Hermione decided, cradling the galleon to her heart. She wondered if Katie felt the love she sent to her through the stars, the pleas she gave to the old Gods. Did it cross the universe? Hermione didn't believe in any religion, but prayers dropped from her lips.

*You're not alone*, she whispered, willing it to travel on the air currents.

When the first green arrived, Hermione kissed the galleon. The next week it switched back and forth between blue and green, blue and green.

Then, finally, it stayed green, and Hermione almost let her concern for her friend rest.

But, shortly after, it turned yellow.

And it stayed yellow.

Like before, Hermione had nowhere to bury the worry except deep in her soul.

---

Before she knew it, summer ended, and gentle sunshine filtered through the window panes. Tabitha had returned several weeks before and was taking an afternoon nap, Titus was at work, and Theo went to get supplies for his upcoming internship at St. Mungo's, leaving Hermione by herself. Unfortunately, Theo hadn't been able to bring her back to Diagon Alley because of increased Order activity.

Hermione couldn't believe she thought it, but she missed Draco and his swaggering confidence— and his schemes that would, no doubt, get her in trouble again someday.

In the hours of boredom, Hermione's mind wandered, and she couldn't help but touch herself. She thought of Malfoy's hands trailing down her legs, scrunching her dress up, slipping his hands inside her knickers.

*Be sure to masturbate to the thought of me.*

She didn't want to. Draco was too egotistical as it was, but his words replayed in her mind as she rested on the bed.

Hermione let the desire flow through her and copied the movements in her mind. She ran her fingers along her legs, brushing the soft skin of her thighs.

*Wet for me?* Draco whispered in her ear.

She slipped off her knickers and pushed up the hem of her dress.

*Do you want my fingers inside you?*

*Yes.*

Hermione touched herself with practiced efficiency, knowing just the spots to bring herself pleasure. She groaned, turning her face to the side, imagining Draco's fingers... his cock.

She imagined it filling her as he moved over her, sliding in and out. The image she produced brought a visceral response, increasing the ache between her thighs.

She pushed her dress up further to get a better angle.

The door opened, and Titus walked into the room while taking off his gloves.

"Do you want to—."

Titus froze and so did Hermione. She had her dress up, legs spread at the perfect angle for him to see everything, fingers still resting on her clit.

"*Fuck.*" Titus' voice was low. He took one step forward, eyes intent on her.

"Get out!" Hermione scrambled to pull down her dress, smoothing her skirts.

He stepped back and clenched his hand.

"Merlin... I'm sorry, Sprite."

He turned and left as if a ghost chased him.

When the door closed behind him, Hermione twisted and screamed into her pillow, wondering if it was possible to die from embarrassment.

---

Hermione stayed in her room the rest of the day. She'd be content to stay there for the rest of eternity and never face anyone ever again, but Bitty arrived in her room when she missed dinner.

"Master Titus wants Mistress Hermione to attend dinner."

"Didn't he already finish eating?"

"Master Titus is waiting. He told Bitty to put warming charms on the food."

Hermione cursed, burying her face in her hands. "Just tell him I'm not feeling well."

Her stomach growled. She'd need to exit her room and face him eventually, but she feared she'd self-combust.

"Master Titus said he's not leaving until Mistress Hermione comes to dinner. If she doesn't, Master will come and get her."

Titus entering her room again would be infinitely worse.

"Very well."

Hermione got up, making sure for the millionth time that her knickers were securely in place, her clothing was in order, and nothing could be seen.

---

Hermione ate her food in silence. She felt Titus' eyes on her occasionally as she forked up a bite of cottage pie. The food tasted like ash in her mouth, but she put her total concentration on her plate, watching as her dinner slowly disappeared with each bite.

Finally, Titus set his fork down and leaned back in his chair, blue eyes shining. She only glanced up long enough to see a lopsided smirk tilt the edge of his lip up.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I'd rather give my soul to a Dementor." Hermione scooped up another bite, wishing the floor could swallow her. How could she ever look at him again? Maybe they both could be obliviated. She'd risk her brain scrambling, if she could be assured they'd both forget the incident.

"I should have knocked," he said.

"I *don't* want to talk about it."

"Everyone does it. It's perfectly natural to explore—"

Hermione slammed her fork on the table.

Titus barked out a laugh.

Hermione finally let herself meet his gaze, her whole chest spasming with mortification. His blue eyes glittered with mirth.

A small snort made its way involuntarily through her nose. They stared at each other for several more seconds, suspended in the tension, before they both burst out laughing at the same time.

When they finally calmed down, Titus' smile faded into something reflective. His eyes burned into her, examining her, and she once again wished to vanish from the intense inspection.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about," he said. "Not with me."

That did nothing to get rid of the shame wanting to swallow her whole.

"I'm tired," Hermione said, wishing to exit the conversation. She was glad he'd forced her to face him, but she didn't know what to do with his expression. It reminded her of hunger, though he'd already eaten his food. She was afraid of what might happen if she explored it—afraid of what might change.

Titus lost his grin as she stood up, but he nodded his acceptance of her leaving.

---

Hermione rested by the pool on a plush chair, soaking in the sunshine. It had been raining for two weeks straight, and Hermione wanted to take advantage of the sun while she could.

A volley of water exited the pool and splashed against her. Hermione sat up with a shocked gasp, instantly furious.

"Theodore Nott!"

The target of her anger treaded water in the deep end, giving her one of his most mischievous smirks.

"You're being boring."

"Oh, I'll show you boring!" Hermione got up, gave a running jump, and landed on her brother in the pool, making sure to dunk him. "You'll be lucky if I don't drown you for that," she sputtered out when she breached the water.

Theo only laughed harder as they continued to splash each other.

They spent the rest of the day in the pool, enjoying each other's company. When the sun began to dip in the afternoon, Hermione tugged herself up and out of the water, intent on sunbathing until she dried off enough to go back inside.

Hermione grabbed a towel Bitty had left. An instinct prickled along her neck— she was being watched. She searched for the source— and then suddenly looked up.

In the upper window, Titus stared down at her. She was close enough to see his intense gaze, eyes trained on her. They locked eyes for a moment before he stepped back and pulled the curtains closed.

---

Once dry, Hermione made her way inside the manor. When she walked past the living room, she heard the floor popping.

A woman stepped through with bleached blond hair and colorful makeup.

The muggle woman.

She'd been over several times since the first time Hermione had seen her. Usually, the woman gave her a sly smile, a taunting wave of her fingers, and then walked past without speaking.

This time the muggle stepped closer. Hermione fought her instinctive reaction to rear back and step away from the woman's proximity, forcing herself to stay still, knowing she was attempting to intimidate her.

"Is it wise to walk around like that?" The muggle asked.

"Like what?"

She was just in her swimming costume. Granted, it was a little small; she hadn't gotten a new one since last summer. Her breasts had gotten bigger, hips wider. The curves of a woman, Tabitha told her.

But she was in her own home, and she could walk around in whatever she wanted.

"I can see everything. Your nipples." The woman touched her breast and brushed her hand down. "Your pussy." Right before she reached the apex of her thighs, Hermione slapped her hand away. The magic stirred inside her veins, like it often did when threatened.

"Don't touch me."

"So very *very* tempting." She leaned in and Hermione scrambled back, unable to stand her ground anymore. "You should join us sometime. I think it would be enlightening."

"I'm going to tell Titus if you ever get near me again."

She only snorted out a laugh and gave a taunting wink.

"Do tell him. I'm afraid there are things the little doll doesn't understand yet."

"What are you talking about?"

"Like I said," she said. "Next time, you should join us."

Hermione let her lips curl in disgust as the woman walked out of the living room on her way to Titus.

---

Theo decided to get his own flat before his internship, because he wanted more independence. Though she understood why he did it, the separation gutted her, thinking of losing him all over again, despite his promise to floo home every weekend.

The morning he left, she spent most of the day sitting by the old south pond where they had spent most of their time as children. If she listened closely, she might have heard the faint echo of laughter, the splash of water. Time wasn't linear, so she believed there was a loop where she remained forever that carefree little girl, excited to find a water beast.

She was happy for Theo. She really was. Theo would do great as a healer, having a natural gentleness to him.

But she wasn't happy for herself. Everyone kept leaving her. Soon the boys would leave, and it wouldn't be too long after that Julie would too.

After several hours of feeling sorry for herself, she grew tired of the cloud of negativity. Instead, she went to the new stables Titus had built. She hated to admit it, but Titus was right—she loved the horses. There was a learning curve to riding, but she enjoyed it, finding it much less terrifying than broom travel.

Within thirty minutes, she was on top of a pretty dappled mare named Astria. Hermione sent her into a gallop across the fields, leaning low, imagining herself as a shooting star hurtling across the universe.

For a moment, she felt free.

---

A few days before her birthday, she went on a search for her cat.

After a thorough inspection of the bottom level, she found Crookshanks sprinting along the corridors.

"Come back," Hermione shouted. "I just want to love you."

Her cat was a prickly thing. He snuck into her bed at night, curling up near her side, but he tended to vanish in the morning. To where, she had no idea. Occasionally, like today, she'd catch sight of him, and she'd hunt him down until he was in her arms. And then she'd kiss his smooshed face until he meowed to get away.

Kneazles were solitary animals. The fact he slept with her showed he'd decided she was his human familiar, but he did what he wanted and wasn't as affectionate as a normal cat.

Crookshanks sprinted along until he took a sharp right into a room. She hesitated at the entrance.

Titus' study.

She'd been in it countless times. When he worked from home, she often sat on the chair in the corner, reading books while he filled out paperwork. She liked to be in the same room as him, listening to the comforting sound of quill scratching parchment.

But she'd never been inside it without him.

Hermione stepped past the doorway, feeling odd. On one side of the room was a bookshelf filled with law textbooks pertinent to his job. She'd never found them particularly interesting, and that was saying something.

"Crookshanks," she whispered. "Come on out, you naughty kitty. You aren't supposed to be in here."

She searched the room, until the last space that remained was under his desk. There she found her cat, looking at her with disdain, licking his paws. She pushed Titus' comfy office chair out of the way and crawled under the desk to get him. Crookshanks retreated further, and Hermione cursed under her breath.

Completely under the desk now, she scooped him up, cradling him to her chest. He was still young and small, though she could tell he'd get chunky soon enough.

She almost opened her mouth to admonish him when the door opened, followed by the unmistakable rhythm of Titus walking inside.

Soon after, a second pair of footsteps walked inside, shoes giving an odd click against the wood. It took a second to place the sound, and when she did, Hermione froze.

The muggle woman. Hermione panicked, not knowing what to do. Crawling out from under the desk would be mortifying.

*Don't have sex*, her mind chanted. Merlin, that might be worse than him walking in on her.

Should she wait it out, or should she make her presence known before things got out of control? At the moment, the heavy wooden panels hid her from view, but they might not for long.



Titus walked over, grabbed his chair, and twisted it sideways. Hermione stared at his trousers in horror, wondering when she'd be discovered. His expensive dragon hide boots slid against the rug as he collapsed against his office chair, legs spread. Now she had a perfect view of him, and she held her breath, sure he'd spot her at any moment. He'd already taken off his cloak, leaving his black dress shirt. His tie was missing and a few buttons on the shirt were undone; the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showing off his muscular forearms.

"The usual?" The woman asked.

Titus didn't answer. She noticed by the clench of his hands on the armrests that he'd entered interrogation mode. The veins showed with the pressure.

"Bitty told me you spoke to Hermione the last time you came here."

"I did."

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her she looked delectable in her little swimming costume. I'm sure you noticed. Such a curvy thing. I merely offered for her to join us."

"What *the fuck* did you just say?"

Titus' hands tightened more, and Hermione pressed her lips together, hoping Crookshanks didn't make a sound. Escape was out of the question. She'd just need to stay hidden until he left.

"I was curious what she thought. Unfortunately, she seemed put off by the idea— repulsed, actually. You may need to consider giving your affections to someone else."

His fingers clenched harder until his knuckles turned white, and then they loosened.

"Don't talk to her again."

"Yes, master."

Unlike when Hermione had said it, he didn't correct her. Hermione stifled a noise of surprise when Titus turned in his chair and opened a top drawer. It held his personal stash of potions, locked with blood wards. Some were dangerous. Some not. He had all sorts, including a healthy stock of Veritaserum and others he used for his job.

He extracted a nondescript potion, opening the lid. It looked like he added something to it, but Hermione couldn't see what.

The click of the woman's heels neared. When she got close, she took them off, kicking them aside, leaving her barefoot, and then she kneeled, in perfect view to see her. The woman looked over, and for one horrific moment, their eyes met. A flash of surprise crossed her expression, and Hermione almost felt like vomiting.

She braced herself for the embarrassment of being discovered. But the surprise vanished from the muggle's eyes, and then her attention went to Titus, grabbing the potion he extended to her.

Hermione despaired of getting out of the situation without being discovered, knowing things were about to start getting intimate.

The woman looked at her once more—a fast glance with an odd expression that Hermione might label as pity. And then she uncapped the potion, tipped back her head, and drank it.

As she watched, the woman's bleached blond hair extended into dark curls. Her skin darkened into a golden hue. Her body shortened a little. In the woman's skimpy clothes, she saw her hips widen, breasts shrinking just a little, looking softer in the top.

It took ten seconds to complete the transition. By the end, she was staring at her own doppelgänger.

*Titus polyjuiced a muggle woman into her.*

The woman now had Hermione's face, her body, her hair.

Her first emotion beyond shock was confusion.

Why would he do that?

But Hermione knew. A dark, secret part had always known—the kisses that lingered close to her lips, the hugs that lasted too long, the stares that felt heavy, the cryptic statements. Hermione might have been confused by the clues— she might have tried to deny them— but an instinct inside her *knew*.

She swayed and put a hand on the wood next to her head to steady herself.

The woman noticed her distress, giving a mocking grin, now devoid of pity.

*Stupid girl*, she seemed to say. *Pretty little doll*.

Titus placed his wand to the woman's clothes, and they transfigured into the beige swimming costume she'd worn that day with Theo. The woman had been right. It left nothing to the imagination, much too tight along her curves, showing the outline of every private area. With a brush of the woman's hand to her breast, her nipples stood erect against the cloth.

"So naughty." The woman ran a hand along the curve of her hip. "Maybe today you'll break that convoluted moral code of yours and shove your cock inside this delicious pussy."

Acid spiked up her throat at the thought. Hermione didn't have the language to express her thoughts. It felt wrong, despite it not being her. Very wrong.

"I don't pay you for your opinions." Titus said.

The woman only let one eyebrow raise, but she scooted forward, and when she got close enough, she reached forward and tugged at his belt and then unzipped Titus' trousers. He helped her push down the clothing with a tilt of his hips up, just enough to pull out his cock.

Hermione tried to look away—she really did— but she couldn't. The only other cock she'd seen had been Draco's. They looked similar, except Draco's might be longer. Titus seemed a little thicker, though it was hard to tell. A morbid part of her was fascinated with it. The beat of her heart traveled down her body, transforming into the familiar pulsing sensation of arousal that she couldn't stop.

The woman leaned down, but Titus stopped her.

"Wait."

The woman looked at him with familiar eyes. *Doe eyes*, Tabitha had told her once. Hermione had long eyelashes, framing dark eyes. She'd always thought they were her best feature, but now they looked wrong on a different body.

Titus cradled her cheek.

"You're so beautiful." He brushed a thumb along her lip. The woman opened her mouth to let his thumb enter, touching her teeth. "Don't be afraid. I'd never hurt you."

He wasn't saying this to the muggle.

He was saying this to *Hermione*.

Hermione put her fist in her mouth and bit down hard. She hated that a part of her burned with his words, heat pooling low, nerves pulled tight, though it was tempered by fear. How could she be responding to this?

The woman gave a little nod without speaking and slowly leaned forward, keeping his stare.

She grabbed his cock and gave a lick from the base to the tip, swirling her tongue at the end.

He groaned, but he reached out and grabbed her hair near her skull.

"A little too experienced," his voice rumbled low. "She's a virgin."

A flash of something passed the woman's face and then she leaned over and took Titus in her mouth. Hermione knew a person could technically put their mouth on a cock. She still remembered Blaise's threat, but seeing it was something else. The muggle seemed to struggle fitting it.

"Just like that," he breathed out, now threading both hands in her hair. "You're doing so good."

From there, it was a series of low groans, a few whispers of affection. Hermione couldn't rip her eyes away. Listening to her name mumbled on his lips in pleasure made all of the hair on her arms stand on end. Her nipples tightened under her shirt. She almost reached a hand

down to press against her clit, wondering how she could feel desire while also feeling revulsion.

"Take all of me," he demanded. "I know you can do it. Fuck, yes, like that. That's my girl. So eager to learn how to please me. Let me teach you how. I'll make you feel so good. You're—*fuck*—you're mine."

The woman's eyes watered as Titus tilted his hips up, pulling her head down by her curls. And then he stilled with a strangled groan.

Hermione watched in horrified fascination as the muggle woman expertly swallowed his release.

When done, he tugged out. The woman sat back and wiped her mouth. Titus stared at the fake Hermione. She could admit she made quite the sight on her knees, a drop of cum on her lips, mouth swollen, curls electrified, showing off her tight nipples and every curve.

"Bloody hell." He ran a hand over his face and though his hair then leaned his head back with a deep groan, as if in pain.

The woman gave a soft mocking laugh, wiping her mouth again.

"Every time you finish you seem to hate yourself. Is the Butcher finally feeling guilty about something?"

This woman had absolutely no filter.

Titus didn't answer, staring at the ceiling. Then he squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

"I shouldn't be doing this, but I—it's better than pursuing her. I'm not sure why I'm even talking to a whore about this."

"Because I'm a woman, and you don't have anyone else to discuss it with."

Titus frowned and straightened his neck to look at her. He ran a hand across the stubble on his cheek, and then clenched his jaw.

"You're unfortunately correct. What would you suggest I do?"

"Does she know how you feel about her?" the woman asked, standing up and walking out of Hermione's sight. Hermione was grateful she couldn't see her anymore.

*It would be enlightening*, the woman had said. She'd been trying to warn her from the beginning.

"No," Titus said with a sigh. "She's too innocent, and there's a boundary there that I'm hesitant to cross. Not yet, at least. The only thing she's ever done is kiss Draco fucking Malfoy." He snorted and reached down and tugged up his trousers, zipping and buttoning until back to normal.

"Well, there's your answer. Maybe you could start by kissing her. See if she's receptive."

The woman spoke as if she didn't know Hermione was hidden right under both their noses.

"I've tried. She's not ready. I don't want to scare her."

The woman let out a laugh.

"Good luck with that," the woman mocked. The words seemed directed toward Hermione.

The woman grabbed her discarded heels and turned as if to leave, but Titus reached back over to the drawer, and Hermione once again held her breath in fear. He pulled out another potion.

"Drink this to get rid of the Polyjuice."

She assumed the woman took the vial.

"You wizards are really fucked up. All you need to do is drink something and you become another person. The things that could be done—"

"I'd suggest you don't irritate me. The only reason I allow a filthy muggle like you in my home is because I can't risk this getting out in circles that matter. But... if you really push it, I can silence you too."

"Aye aye, captain."

Would he really kill someone over just the idea of her talking to the wrong person?

Hermione was afraid of the answer, afraid of the implications to her own life. A single moment in time, and nearly twelve years shifted. Her foundation fractured.

Hermione waited under the desk as the woman walked out without another word, whispering silent pleas to the universe for Titus to walk out too, so she could escape and sort through what she'd just seen. But he just sat there, a pensive emotion pinning him in place.

When it seemed like he might finally stand, her traitorous cat meowed. Titus twisted in his chair at the noise and looked under the desk.

Their eyes met. His widened.

"Sprite?"

They stared at each other in horror. She watched the progression of understanding in his expression. The way his brow smoothed, mouth open to see a flash of white teeth.

"Did you see— oh, fuck!"

The word snapped her out of her trance.

Hermione scrambled out, nearly tripping on her dress in her haste. Titus attempted to grab her arm, but she deftly avoided his hold. She didn't look back as she sprinted out of the room,

hurtling down the corridors, ignoring the whispering portraits, ignoring Titus' shouts of her name.

Hermione didn't stop running until she made it to the treehouse.

Sitting in the middle of the old candles, she curled her knees to her chest and allowed herself to hyperventilate, trembling in fear, hating that her body was still aroused when she shouldn't be.

## Chapter End Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Sexual assault? Maybe. It depends on how you look at it. Also, Grooming, because of the power dynamic.

# Chapter 21: Desire's Consequence

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Woodkid- "In Your Likeness" This is 100% a Titus song.

And Tamino- "Persephone" Couldn't decide between the two.

-My awesome beta, MyPrivateInsanity, wrote a naughty AU called In the Study where Hermione gives into her desire after watching Titus. You can find the link at the bottom of chapter 20 on ao3. As always, a big thank you to them for editing this giant chapter. As a reward for waiting an extra week, this chapter is 9K!

-There are now two House Pet discords. One is Titus centered (Butcher Bae). The other is focused on House Pet in general.

Butcher Bae link: <https://discord.gg/N2TgQx7U>

House Pet link: <https://discord.gg/PWWjydSe>

Trigger Warning at the bottom.

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

## Desire's Consequence

Hermione stayed in the treehouse, only getting out to go to the loo and to bathe. On the second day, she made one daring excursion to her room to retrieve some clean clothes and the books under her floorboard, along with her wand.

Bitty brought her everything else she needed, including food. The first meal was the equivalent of an apology. She and Titus always had dinner together no matter what disagreements they'd had. It was one of the only rules he usually enforced. But this was worse than anything he'd ever done before. When Bitty materialized with the roast lamb and mashed potatoes, she knew Titus was acknowledging how much he fucked up.

Two days into her self-confinement, her birthday arrived. Theo came home for the afternoon. To his credit, he didn't ask why she wouldn't come down, besides a brief explanation that she was *angry* at something Titus had of pushing for an answer, he joined her, bringing up the cake. Julie, Dean, and Finch showed up an hour later, and they all sang happy birthday. Hermione opened their presents with a forced smile. She could tell Theo had questions, but he never asked. And she was glad, because how could she tell him what she'd seen? Just the thought made shame eat through her.

After Theo and her friends left, Bitty brought a birthday gift from Titus. Without opening it, Hermione marched her way to the pond and threw it in the water, finding satisfaction at the

sight of it sinking under the water. She suspected Titus watched from a window, but she didn't look to confirm his location before heading back to her sanctuary.

At night, Hermione snuggled into the pillows and blankets that Bitty had provided, but she couldn't get comfortable. She sang herself happy birthday, knowing all it meant was just one more day closer to her Trials.

Crookshanks surprised her later by climbing the tree. He curled up beside her as she looked out the window toward the manor. The light in Titus' bedroom was on, but the rest of the manor was dark, bathed in moonlight. She scratched behind Crookshanks' ears, wondering how he knew she was up in the treehouse.

But kneazles had a sixth sense about things. She wondered if Crookshanks hid under Titus' desk on purpose. Maybe he'd wanted her to know what Titus had been doing. A part of her wished she'd never discovered it.

"I know I can't stay up here forever, Crooks, but I don't know what to do. I don't even know what to feel."

---

For nearly a week, she rested in her sanctuary, feeling safe among the trees. Julie, the boys, and Theo couldn't visit that week, so she had no one to help her through the intense boredom.

But she'd had years to learn to survive monotony. So Hermione practised, with and without her wand. She read her books, attempting to decipher the runic dark magic in the skin-bound book to no avail, allowing its tendrils to soak into her chest, even when it hurt. She had pretend conversations with her friends. She even built up an entire imaginary life for herself where she went to Hogwarts. In it, she made lots of friends and married a normal bloke she loved very much and still worked, preferably at the ministry, where people looked at her with the same respect that they looked at Titus.

Hermione understood what she did was pathetic and dreadfully sad, but she persisted.

However, after a solid week, when she called for Bitty, the elf didn't arrive.

It was clear that Titus wanted to force a confrontation, but she'd rather starve.

Hermione went without dinner and breakfast and lunch and then dinner again.

If it wasn't for the thirst, she would have held out longer. Hunger she could manage. It just meant meditating through the sharp pangs. But when she ran out of water, the burning that slicked down her throat couldn't be ignored.

She wavered, wondering if she could drink pond water, but she dismissed it. Wizards didn't get sick from most muggle illnesses, but even wizards shouldn't drink from a stagnant pond.

Hermione waited until it became too painful to continue. The burning in her throat twisted into a headache that pounded along with her heartbeat. When the dark invaded the treehouse,



and the moon travelled to the middle of the sky, Hermione climbed down. She slipped through the gardens and into the manor, tiptoeing around.

She went to the kitchen first and drank water from the sink tap until the burning in her throat subsided. Then she went through the pantry, taking a bag of crisps and several apples. She ate a few pastries, nearly inhaling them in her haste to fill her stomach.

Hermione didn't turn around when she heard the footsteps. She focused on dragging a loaf of bread out and placing it in the bag she'd brought. She intended to fill it up, along with a jug of water, and go back.

"Hermione."

She ignored him, intent on stuffing the bag full.

The footsteps neared.

"Put the bag down."

"No."

"We need to talk."

"I'm perfectly content to never talk to you ever again."

"Enough! We *need* to talk about this. You can't hide forever." He yanked the bag from her hand. She twisted with her wand out, pointed at his nose. Titus sighed as he placed her bag on the center of the rough-hewn table.

If he wanted a confrontation, then she'd give him a *confrontation*.

He expected magical retaliation, but he didn't prepare for muggle violence. With her free hand, she picked up a spoon left on the counter and threw it at him. Even his quick reflexes didn't spare him as it smacked against his nose.

He cursed and briefly clutched his face.

"What the fuck." He narrowed his eyes. "Are you done?"

"You're not crying or bleeding, so no."

She grabbed an empty jug and aimed it at his head. This time—unfortunately—he ducked in time, and it missed, smashing into shards on the tile.

"Are you ready to talk about it like an adult?"

She'd run out of nearby things to hurl at him, so she supposed she could *talk*.

Hermione vibrated with the rage that had built for a week. "H—how long have you done that? One more lie and I'll use the worst curses I know."

She'd first seen the woman sometime before Christmas. For almost an entire year, he'd been doing this, at the very least.

"Since your birthday," he admitted. "Not what you saw, but my feelings—the thought of you going to someone else repulsed me. The Trials had always seemed so far away, and imagining some boy's grubby fingers touching you—"

"That doesn't—"

"Let me explain." He sounded a little panicked. "Not long after, I saw you standing near your window. The curtains were open, and you were in your knickers. I didn't mean to see you, but I—fuck, I don't know. I just couldn't stop thinking of you. One day you were some kid with skinned knees and wild hair, and the next—" He looked haunted. "The next you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen."

"There are plenty of other beautiful women besides me. You bring them home all the time. Or — well, you used to."

Now that she thought about it—besides the muggle—he hadn't brought any women around in the last six months.

His expression softened.

"The other women don't matter to me. Not like you do." His hand twitched as if he wished to reach out to her. "I admit that desiring you felt wrong at first. I fought it for as long as I could. But the harder I resisted it, the more it grew. Of course, I desire you. You're the only woman I think I'll ever love. It's natural that it evolved into more. But I never meant for you to see that. I never meant to scare you."

They'd always had an odd relationship with ill-defined boundaries. She'd once wanted nothing more than for him to look at her like this. And now that he did, all it did was make her wary and confused.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I planned to talk to you at Christmas, but everything went wrong."

"The universe?" She reached up and touched the necklace. The crystal rested in the hollow of her throat. Even angry at him, she found it hard to take off.

He swallowed, and it looked as if he might be blushing— something she'd only rarely seen.

"You were angry with me, and I decided it wasn't the right time. After healing from the attack, I'd hoped—" He stopped himself and sucked in a breath. "And when I walked into your room to find you—I almost went to you then. It took all my self-control to walk out. I had dreams for days of replacing your fingers with mine. I—"

"Stop."

His jaw clenched, the ripple of tension pulsing down his neck.

"I don't expect anything out of you like what you saw. Do you understand that? I don't expect anything at all. Just because I had a whore—"

"Did you ever have sex with her while she was—when she wore my body?"

"Never. I swear on my mother's grave."

Maybe he told her the truth. The woman did mention something about a convoluted moral code. Maybe he had a few boundaries he never let himself cross.

"So you only touched my— mouth?"

Titus grimaced, but he nodded.

"I should have never done that either." He took a step forward, and she stumbled back. "I thought it was better than—fuck, I'll apologise on my knees—in any way that you want. I'll do anything for your forgiveness." He took another step. "But I *refuse* to apologise for what I feel for you."

The edge of the counter pressed into her back, and she kept her wand raised, though it trembled.

"I'm not sure what you're wanting from me."

"If I said nothing, it would be a lie." His eyes slid across her face, as if caressing it. "Because I want all of you."

"What if I don't want to give you anything?"

He grimaced again, and he took another step forward— much too close.

The wand now dug under his chin, but it was useless. Hermione found out too late that she didn't have it in her to truly hurt Titus, even if he betrayed her, even if he scared her.

"I've always admired your courage." His blue eyes glowed in the muted moonlight as he studied her. "You fight for what you want, and you go after it, no matter what kind of trouble it can get you into." He placed his hands on either side of her hips, gripping the counter, caging her in place. "I'm not like that. Every decision is agonising. I weigh the risks and the benefits, taking months to make a simple choice with as much logic as I can. But when it comes to you— I don't know what to do. There aren't any easy answers."

"I should curse you."

"You can if you need to," he whispered, leaning his face near hers. "I won't fight back. Wound me. You're the only woman I'll allow to do so. Do it right now."

He waited, but she did nothing. Hermione shook, wand still under his chin, as he pressed closer, enough that she could feel the outline of his body, the muscles ridged under the fabric of his clothes.

"In five seconds, I'm going to kiss you," he warned. "Because now that you know, I can't continue with this torture. I refuse to go another second without attempting to show you what we can be."

*Five.*

"What if I tell you no?"

*Four.*

For years, she'd wanted to know what it would be like to kiss him. Did she still want to?

*Three.*

"You can say no."

*Two.*

It was unfair how handsome he was and how good he smelled. It made it hard to think, especially since she still wanted to melt his face off.

*One.*

Maybe she needed to kiss him, just to finally know what it would be like. The only person she'd ever kissed was Draco, and it scrambled her perception.

*Zero.*

The word no rested on the tip of her tongue, but she found she couldn't speak as Titus leaned in, keeping his eyes locked on hers.

"I'll be as gentle as you need me to be," he promised. Ever so softly, he connected their lips. As if afraid she'd bolt, he didn't move. Just rested their mouths together.

Still, her mind reminded her of everything wrong about the situation. Why was she letting him do this? She shouldn't. Not after what she'd seen. But curiosity had always been her downfall. The desire that she'd felt, despite the anger, needed to be explored to discover if it was real or not.

When she gave no resistance, he sighed in contentment and pressed harder, his lips full and enticing. She didn't kiss back yet, too confused.

"You see, it's okay," he whispered, pulling back slightly. "It's just a kiss."

When their lips met again, he expertly angled his mouth, sliding his tongue along her lips until she opened.

Titus tasted clean and smelled like cinnamon, a scent that calmed her, despite his betrayal.

Was she scared of him, or did he make her feel safe? Somehow, it was both, and Hermione didn't know how to reconcile the dichotomy. She knew she must be fucked up in the head. How could a person like kissing a man after what she'd seen him do?

It was obvious Titus had done this many times before. He moved his lips and tongue against her expertly, nipping her lips, sending little bolts of pleasure through her—as if her body responded to the sensation whether she willed it or not.

He brushed his tongue against hers, and the taste and feel of him overwhelmed her senses, causing her to respond with a hesitant stroke of her own, finally participating.

Titus groaned—a sound of victory. His hands curled in her hair, increasing the intensity of his kiss. The tingle turned to fire, and it emboldened her more. On impulse, she captured his bottom lip in her teeth, sucking softly before releasing it again.

"Careful," his voice rumbled against her lips. "I'm not sure I have that much control."

And because she sometimes didn't make wise decisions, she bit at his bottom lip like he'd done to her.

"You're wanting to play rough?"

In an almost violent movement, his hands trailed down her hips going under her knees, pulling up and separating, so that she could wrap them around him, setting the edge of her bum on the counter. One hand tangled in the back of her hair, tugging her head back to get a deeper angle. The other hand still rested on her knees, and it slowly slid up and up and up along her thigh, until the clouds cleared in her mind.

What he was doing felt good, but his experience intimidated her, and things were going further than she wanted. Draco was on an equal footing with her. Neither of them had anything to compare their interactions to, so it felt like fun exploration. But with Titus, it felt like being herded into something more serious—something she wasn't ready for. If she continued, she had the instinct she might get irreparably burned. There'd be no climbing back up from the descent.

Hermione pulled back with a sharp gasp, separating them.

"Let me go," she whispered.

Titus looked dazed as he stared at her mouth and then searched her expression, brows furrowing at her sudden rejection. She wondered what he found. Did he see the answers he needed?

The hunger under the surface of his stare threatened to eat her alive, but he allowed her to push away. She slid out of his hold, though he still stood before her.

He tried to reach out and cradle her cheek. But she stepped away from him. He sighed at her retreat.

"Don't go back to the treehouse tonight," he said, tucking his hands in his pockets. "I'll stay out of your way."

Titus began to walk out. Hermione clutched the edge of the counter behind her, trying to understand what just happened.

"Titus," she said. He stilled, but he didn't look back. "This *doesn't* mean I've forgiven you. I don't know if I can trust you anymore."

He'd always taken his duty to protect her like a vow to a god. That he was the one who had frightened her must haunt him, and she hoped it did.

"I know," he whispered and left the room.

The kiss didn't solve anything, besides make her more wary of the change in their relationship. It was a war inside her heart between desire and the uncomfortable understanding that desire might not be enough.

---

Dean and Finch left two weeks later.

"Check on Katie," she begged them, while handing them their coins. The worry already ate through her soul. She'd never told them about how Katie's coin had turned black, and she still hesitated doing so, not wishing to scare them. What good would it do to frighten them now? Despite her hopes, she hadn't figured out how to make a coin that could send text.

The boys promised to check on her, of course. Only Hermione remained without tears, wishing she could cry. Something was still broken inside her. She'd lost her tears long ago and never regained them. She wondered what it would take for them to break free. And she feared when they finally did, she'd cry a lifetime of tears.

Hermione's chest ached as the boys climbed down the bucket rope and walked away one last time. Julie stayed with her for the rest of the afternoon. They both lay side by side, staring up at the ceiling of the treehouse, searching for comfort.

Hermione darkened the room with wandless magic and touched the choker on her neck—the universe Titus gave her. She'd shown Julie the goblin enchantment before, but her friend still gasped at the beauty twirling around them, as if they could walk into the stars.

"Are you scared of the Trials?" Julie asked, watching Venus hovering in the corner. The question made Hermione pause, so reminiscent of her last conversation with Katie.

"Sometimes," Hermione admitted. The black galleon burned in her mind—a warning. "Are you?"

"I'm more excited than scared."

"Whatever for?"

"Love," she whispered. "Babies."

Of course. Julie had always wanted to be a mother, and she was a bit of a romantic.

"But what if you don't love your wizard? What if you hate him?"

"I think everyone has something lovable about them."

Hermione couldn't help her cynical snort. She'd always been more of a realist. The odds of love were slim. It's the reason she had destroyed any threat of feeling in her soul.

And babies? Just the thought made her recoil. To her, they resembled shackles. Or maybe an unwilling sacrifice. She'd be forced to trade any ambition or dream just so she could birth someone else's. Hermione already felt like a ghost wandering the manor. Would she be even more invisible as a mother? Would her footsteps even make a sound? She didn't want to tiptoe through life. She wanted to stomp and roar and shake the Earth with her presence.

"I hope you get it," Hermione said. "Love, happiness. You'll make the best mother."

And Julie would. So patient. So sweet. She'd never known a person so tender. No wonder she won over a terrifying witch like Bellatrix. Only a soul like Julie's could attract the dark and, instead of being consumed by it, shine a light into it until she banished the shadows.

Hermione loved Katie, but she'd always connected to Julie in a special way. Maybe it was how soothing her presence was— an aura that reminded her of spring.

She sincerely hoped Julie got everything in life she desired—a man that loved her and plenty of babies. So far Goyle was the only one who'd put in for her, and Hermione thought they'd make a great match. But Hermione didn't know if she wanted the life destined for her. The future had turned into a knife, seconds away from digging its blade into her soul.

Julie reached out and grabbed her hand, giving a gentle squeeze.

"It won't be long before our lives begin."

The thought gave Julie hope, but it only gave Hermione dread.

---

After Julie left, she went back into the manor, overwhelmed with depression. How would she survive the future isolation? Life was offering her only two paths - loneliness or motherhood - and she didn't want either of them.

It's not that she didn't ever want to be a mother. She thought she might want one or two children in the future. It's just not the *only* thing she wanted to do with her life.

Titus stepped out of the floo just as she walked inside. They stared at each other with awkward tension. He'd let her avoid him since the kiss. It used to be so easy in his presence, but something had driven a wedge between them now— a betrayal she found impossible to overlook. The trust she'd had in him broke while she sat under his desk, and desire couldn't patch it back up.

Still, everything inside her had cracked, and she had no one else. So she trembled with suppressed emotion that wanted to boil up through her broken parts as he walked toward her.

"They've already left? Oh, Sprite. I'm sorry." She didn't retreat when he tugged her into a tight hug. The scent of fire lingered on his auror uniform, and she thought she might see a splash of blood on the skin just above his black gloves. "I know you're still angry with me, but let me comfort you."

For some reason, as she stood in his embrace, stealing the comfort she desperately needed, the hair on the back of her neck stood up.

---

In October, Hermione sat in the ministry ballroom, filled with important witches and wizards.

The applause was deafening as Titus walked across the stage. He'd never looked more handsome. He'd cut his hair shorter than normal, and his blue eyes gleamed. The Minister for Magic made a speech, listing Titus' accomplishments, including all of the rebellions he'd crushed and all of the terrorists he'd dug out of hiding. In the past three years, he'd also found four muggleborns—all girls.

"It is my sincere belief that we wouldn't have the peace we have now without Titus Nott. Which is why I am deeply honoured to introduce him as our newest Mediator."

The applause once again shook the air. Tabitha wiped away happy tears before clapping enthusiastically. Titus bowed his head as the minister put a medal around his neck. The gold gleamed under the bright lights.

Then he straightened and stood still as the minister took off his old DMLE badge and replaced it with his shiny new gold Mediator badge.

It was a great honor. At twenty-eight, he was the youngest ever in the position. There were now four Mediators in all, including the head auror named Dolohov. Dean's old master, Avery, and another named McNair held the other two spots.

But even compared to the seasoned Mediators, Titus was already ahead in capabilities and results. He held promise to take over full control of the auror department if he kept up his pace.

While the audience continued with their applause, Hermione chanced a glance to the stage and found Titus staring right back at her. When their eyes met, one side of his mouth tilted up into a gentle smile, showing off his dimple. Even though she was still angry with him, she returned his smile.

He'd worked so hard to get this position, and she was proud of him, despite his betrayal.

Throughout the rest of the ceremony, while everyone stared at Titus, he stared at her.

---



Later that night, Hermione curled up in the library in her favourite chair, flipping through an old, dog-eared book of Titus' mother's— another old romance novel. This one had a few scenes that pushed the boundaries of appropriate pureblood culture. In her favourite part, the two protagonists started taking off each other's clothes. It didn't show anything more, but Hermione read it over and over, always liking the thrill it gave her low in her stomach.

She'd already checked Dean and Finch's coins for the night, finding them both blue. Dean's sometimes went to green, which always made her relieved to see, but Finch's stayed blue. At the very least, they never went black. Afterwards, she checked Katie's, finding it green for the night. Hermione kissed all three before going back to reading.

Thirty minutes later, the pop of the floo caught her attention, but she ignored it, knowing it was only Titus arriving home. He'd gone out to celebrate his new position with some of his friends—or colleagues, really. Hermione wasn't quite sure if Titus had any friends. Not any real ones.

She absorbed herself in her reading. All the lights were off, except for a few fairy lights charmed to hover over her chair. It was just getting to the good part when Titus entered the library.

She looked up to see him at the entrance to the room, leaning a palm on the doorframe while staring at her.

"I love coming home to you." His words sounded slurred.

"Are you drunk?" Hermione asked, blinking slowly at the odd sight.

Titus *never* got drunk. He once told her he liked to be in control of his actions.

"A little," he lied.

He took a step and stumbled. When he went to his knees, he gave an uncharacteristic laugh. Hermione wondered if she should get Tabitha or Bitty to help her get him to his rooms.

But Tabitha was asleep, and she didn't like making Bitty work at night.

Hermione decided to do it herself. She walked over and reached down to help him. He staggered up.

"I'm fine, Sprite."

"Sure."

He leaned a little on her, arm across her shoulders. The rest of the way to his room he walked easier, only wobbling a few times. She smelled the alcohol, so strong she thought she could taste it in the air.

"Are you going to need any potions?" She asked.

"Not yet." He gave another uncharacteristic laugh. "Do you want to know why I'm so happy?"

"Why are you so happy?" She went past her room and continued to his.

"Now that I'm a Mediator, no one can take you away. Lucius' blackmail is over. I could give back Draco's token."

Hermione missed her step in shock, almost stumbling.

"What?"

"I think I'll still let the tosser compete."

"Why?" A sense of disquiet fell over her at the thought.

Titus shrugged.

"Teach him a fucking lesson." He grinned, showing both his dimples. He looked young right now, more carefree. It almost charmed her, despite his declaration having disturbing connotations.

"Let's get you to bed."

The door to his room cracked open as they neared, and they both stumbled through. Titus fell into his giant bed, tugging her along with him in a tight hug.

"My bed," he said. "Right where I want you."

"Titus," she warned, attempting to get out of his hold. But even drunk, he was heavy and strong, so it proved difficult.

When she managed to disentangle herself from his hold, he groaned and made his way to the pillow, not bothering to get under the covers. She unfolded a nearby blanket and draped it over him.

"Why do you hate me?" He asked, closing his eyes.

"I don't hate you. Go to sleep."

"I think a part of you does, and I don't know how to change it." He placed a hand over his eyes, as if the light hurt. She turned off his overhead lights and switched off the lamp, leaving only a glowing fairy light in the far corner. "I still can't believe you gave your first kiss to Malfoy. I bet he fucked it up. It would have been so much better with me."

A tingle marched along her skin, despite telling herself to calm down.

"Goodnight, Titus."

She tried to walk out of his room, but when she wrapped her hand around the doorknob, it didn't budge. She yanked on it a few times before realising that his wards had been activated. While he slept inside, no one could go in or out— an old safe guard of the manor to protect an heir while vulnerable.

Hermione turned to ask him to lift the wards, but like she suspected, he was already asleep. She didn't know if she wanted to attempt to wake him up either to deactivate the wards

After a few minutes of trying to get out in vain, she gave up and went to a nearby reading chair. She curled her feet up, rested her head on the side, and went to sleep.

---

She woke to Titus lifting her.

"Put me down," Hermione said, still halfway in dreamland. She placed her cheek against the warm skin of his chest. He must have gotten changed since they'd entered the room, because he now only wore pyjama bottoms that slung low on his hips, showing off his impressive array of muscles.

"Shh," he said. "You can't be comfortable."

"Aren't you sloshed?"

"I took a potion to help."

"What time is it?"

"Still too early. Your snoring woke me up."

"I don't snore," she said, a little offended.

Titus snorted out a laugh.

"I thought it was a train."

He laid her on his bed. The pillows and covers felt delicious against her skin as she burrowed underneath them. She was too tired to debate as he curled behind her on his side, tugging her into a tight hold, arm cinched around her waist. The human contact felt good. Too good. She craved touch. Despite being exhausted, she found she couldn't fall asleep, while concentrating on the feeling of his hard, warm chest pressed against her back.

After lying there for several minutes in silence, something hard pressed into her from behind, and she realised Titus was both awake and painfully aroused. He didn't do anything about it though. They just both lay there, pressed against each other in an odd suspended state of tension.

On accident, she snuggled back into him, bum brushing against his erection.

A strangled groan tore from his throat.

"Sorry."

"I'm attempting to be a gentleman, but you're making it impossible."

"I— can't sleep."

He paused, as if trying to figure out what she was saying. To be fair, Hermione wasn't sure either.

"You need to relax," he said, voice low. She felt it slick down her body, burning as it went.

"I'm not sure I can."

He gently tugged on her shoulders until she twisted and turned toward him. Her body ached in a familiar unfulfilled way.

"Do you want my help?"

"I don't know," she said, still wary.

He rested his hand on her cheek. They stared at each other for a long time. And then his hand dipped down, eyes on hers, and he reached the top button on her dress. He hesitated a moment before slipping it through its loop, while she stared at him, frozen in indecision.

"Release is healthy," he said. "It's natural to seek it, so there's no need to suffer or to feel embarrassed. Let me help you with your needs." He paused again, thumb brushing over her next button. "You can stop me at any moment, of course. But we don't have to live this way, separate and miserable. Our time together could be so—" he undid another button.

*"Enjoyable."*

The word tugged on her lower stomach. She almost whimpered, afraid of the reaction it caused in her body. He unbuttoned three more without her refusal, showing the outline of her cleavage and bra.

She warred with herself. What if she did give in to the desire? What's the worst that could happen?

"I don't want anything serious. Just... this."

He touched their foreheads together, taking in a deep breath, briefly closing his eyes. Then he kissed her hard, rolling over on top of her in a sudden movement, as if he'd been waiting for her surrender. His hard, large body caged her underneath him, and despite her reservations, it felt heavenly. He sat up, grabbed at the top of her dress with both hands and with a hard tug ripped it down the middle, popping off the buttons. She gasped in surprise, shocked at the ferocity.

"I don't think you understand." Titus leaned down again, eyes sparking with lust, pupils blown. He placed his wand under the middle of her bra, touching their noses, with his erection pressed hard to the middle of her thighs. Unable to tell her body no, she spread her legs further around his hips to let him get closer. "This is serious to me, and I

won't *ever* promise otherwise." He tugged up with his wand and the bra sliced in two, leaving her breasts exposed. She attempted to cover them, but Titus grabbed both her hands, tangling their fingers together, placing them by her head. He glanced down, studying her until her cheeks felt hot. "Bloody hell, just look at you."

He licked his lips, and his head dipped down, mouth covering her breast.

Merlin, she'd never felt anything like it.

"Wait," she said, panting at the sensation. Her whole body pulsed, and she resisted the desire to grind into his erection to get rid of the tension.

But she had an odd feeling that she was making the wrong decision.

Titus stopped on command, glancing up, blue eyes darkening. His wet, hot mouth still covered her breast.

"I don't know if—"

Titus flicked his tongue over her nipple, using his teeth to tug just slightly, and she arched off the bed with the feeling.

The words she'd meant to say disintegrated.

Her thoughts blanked as he sucked on one breast and then the other, until she was writhing under him, hands twisting into the sheets and then grasping at him, nails pressing against his back. His rough hands went to her thighs, pushing up her dress. Sitting up, he slipped his fingers around the edge of her knickers, sliding them down her legs, and throwing them off the bed.

When his lips pressed against the delicate skin of her thigh right above her knee, she shivered with need. She felt like if he stopped, she might combust into flames.

His mouth dipped lower and lower, using his lips and tongue to drag down her skin, tasting her flesh. Her thoughts cleared enough to determine his shocking destination.

"You can't be thinking about putting your mouth— that can't be clean." She attempted to cover herself with her fingers.

Titus laughed, as if she was ridiculous.

"The things I'd like to do to you are *filthy*." He gently pushed her hands away, and then stared at her, taking several shuddering breaths, chest heaving up and down. "You have *no* idea."

As he lowered his head again, she spread her legs on instinct, a silent show of submission, digging her hands in the sheets to anchor herself. He touched every place but where she wanted, setting her nerves on fire as he teased her, and she couldn't bear the torture.

"Please," she said.

He bit her thigh in response, and she gasped, wondering why the pain felt good.

"Beg me again," he demanded. "And use my name like a good girl."

"Please, Titus," she said. "I need you to— I don't know, but I need it."

He groaned and rested his forehead against her thighs.

"I've waited so long for this."

When his lips finally pressed against her clit, she nearly lifted off the bed, but he held her down, placing both her legs on his shoulders.

He kissed her like it was her mouth, just pressure, until he gave a firm swipe of his tongue. Hermione turned her face into the pillow and curled her fingers in his hair.

From there, she lost her place in reality. The world was nothing except searing pleasure and a hot tongue. When it dipped inside her, she began to roll her hips into the sensation.

Right when she was about to go over the edge, he pulled back. She made a noise of frustrated disbelief.

"Why did you stop?"

A sinful grin twisted his lips as he slipped two fingers inside her. They were just as thick as Draco's, but he curled his fingers up, and she let out a low cry.

"I wanted to teach you something new." He brushed his fingers over a sensitive spot inside her with a firm stroke. "This is your g-spot. It can be just as fun to play with as your clit."

"Oh, fuck."

"Now show me how pretty you cum. Let me taste it."

While his fingers were still inside her, stroking the sensitive spot over and over, he leaned down and continued to lick her clit, flattening his tongue.

The orgasm was intense. She pushed her hips up over and over, a scream catching in her throat. Titus gave a low growl, continuing his torture until the sensation crashed and spread along her body, leaving it buzzing.

When she caught her breath, she glanced down to see Titus had already shoved his trunks down, fisting himself. He crawled up until he was over her, right next to the middle of her thighs. He lined himself up.

"Titus," she warned. Now that she'd reached completion, her reason returned.

"I want to fuck you so bad." He jerked his hand on his length. "I'd fill you completely." She felt the tip of his cock go inside, and she scrambled back, but he tugged her back into place. "I'm not going to put it all the way in. I just want to feel your cunt." While using the wet hand

that had been inside her to pleasure himself, it only took a few minutes for him to reach release. He stared at her while he tugged back and came on the remnants of her dress with a low groan.

After he finished, he sat back and stared at her, with her dress ripped in two, breasts exposed, thighs spread. His cum marked her stomach. She wondered what expression she showed him. A part of her was still wary, like she had just jumped into the deep end without knowing how to swim.

They just stared at each other in silence, as if equally shocked at what happened, and then his eyes softened. Using his wand, he cleaned her and repaired her clothes. After, he lay back down beside her and tugged her in close, kissing her on her temple.

"Do you want to change?"

Hermione wasn't sure if she could move even if she wanted to.

"No."

"Then get some sleep. We have several more hours until the morning."

Despite everything, Titus had been right— it did help relax her.

---

Hermione woke and suppressed her startle reflex, knowing she was in a different bed than her own. Her memories returned to her as she stared at the ceiling, and she almost groaned in mortification at what had happened. Things felt different without the cover of night.

"Good morning," Titus said.

Slowly, she sat up, dragging the blankets to her chest, though all her clothes were on. Titus sat in the chair she'd briefly slept in on the opposite wall near his personal bookcase, filled with a lifetime of memorabilia.

The room was comfortable and beautiful, of course. Only the best for the wealthy Nott heir, from the dark, streamlined wooden furniture, to the cream sheets, and the greyed out walls. The only colour was a dark, vibrant green— his favourite colour. It reminded her of the forest.

"We need to have a serious talk," he said.

Hermione looked at him again, not knowing what to expect. She felt awkward in his bed, remembering his tongue on her clit.

Titus slouched in his chair now, wearing casual clothes. His shirt was untucked, and the top unbuttoned. He had his legs spread, leaning to the side slightly, resting the top of his cheek on his fingers as if in deep contemplation. When he met her stare, he sucked in a deep breath.

"Last night was everything I'd hoped for, but I—" He closed his eyes and then opened them while sitting back up. "But I can't allow it to happen again. Not in that way."

"What do you mean?"

Titus acted too subdued, too restrained. He was about to tell her something unpleasant, and it caused all the hair on her body to raise in alarm.

"I thought I could wait years like you wanted, but it's too precarious. If I had—if your virginity had been compromised, it would have resulted in terrible consequences. And I don't trust myself enough to think I wouldn't go all the way the next time. So— to save us both—I'm left with no choice."

"You can't mean—"

"I'm going to start your Trials."

It took a moment to comprehend. To understand. And then panic filled every empty space in her soul.

"You promised," she managed to gasp out. "You *promised* you'd wait until I was twenty-one."

"I did promise." He looked grave but determined. "And I hate that I can't keep that promise. I understand your anger, but it will not move me. I'll spend a lifetime making it up to you, and I hope one day you'll understand that I did what was best for both of us."

Hermione threw her legs over the bed, standing up. She didn't know what to do with the sharp sting of betrayal. Despite her reservations, she'd trusted Titus with everything. How could he do this to her?

"Why are you punishing me?"

"This isn't a punishment."

Titus didn't stand, but it looked like he braced himself to do so if she bolted. His wand rested next to him, so even if she managed wandless magic, it wouldn't matter. He'd taken all of her power, leaving her a shivering newborn deer in the forest.

She'd always felt her lack of choice, but it usually held a benign edge— a show of protection. Her whole life, he'd only given her just enough leeway to give the illusion of freedom, but right now he yanked back her chain to show her the short leash.

*You can't love a person you treat like a dog.*

*Just enough, Nott, just enough.*

She should have paid more attention. She regretted ever letting him touch her, if this was the consequence.

"You plan to be the third token." She'd suspected it since he'd kissed her, but saying it out loud made it more real.



"Of course," he said. "The thought of letting you go— I'm not giving you up to some wizard like Malfoy. Early this morning I turned in all of the tokens."

Her dread managed to increase. She felt ill, like any moment she'd lean over and let the horror drip out of her.

"I refuse it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your token," she said. "You said you'd give me a choice. Well, I refuse it."

He jolted, as if she'd slapped him, having the audacity to look wounded.

"After last night, you'd really refuse my—" He stopped himself, gritting his teeth. "It doesn't matter. It's too late. My token is included."

He'd already put in the tokens, which meant there was no going back.

She grabbed at her chest. It felt like she couldn't take a breath. Titus made to stand up, as if worried.

"Don't come near me."

He seemed frustrated, but he stayed in the chair, strangling the armrests with his hands, while she felt like she was dying. Her breath came in multiple waves of heaving lurches.

"I'm not sure why you're so upset. The Trials were going to happen one day. This way you'll get to see your friends again, and nothing would change much, except we'd be free to be together."

He said that as if he'd win. Unlike when Draco said it, she believed Titus. He'd always been larger than life, capable of anything. What chance did any of them stand against a Mediator?

"I'll never forgive you for this," she seethed. Slowly, her panic died, replaced by a cold rage. She liked this emotion better. It helped her to grab the remaining scraps of her dignity. "You'll spend your life with a woman who hates you."

He flinched, clenching his jaw.

"Regardless of your hate, next week— a day before Samhain— we begin the Trials. Notices have already been sent to the other competitors. I plan to win the first two, and then I plan to place you in that exact same spot."

"I don't want a baby!" Would begging work? It used to crumble his resolve. "I'm not ready to get pregnant. Could you promise—" the word caught in her throat like poison, but she continued. "Could you promise to wait for that?"

The silence dragged and weighed them both down. Titus gave a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Fuck, I want to give in to you," he said. "But I can't. I'll give you *anything* but that."

"Anything?" She glanced around, understanding the complete emptiness of her existence. She might as well be a piece of furniture. "What could you give me that I'd want?"

"Merlin, you're so fucking spoiled." He ran a hand over his short hair, showing his distress. "Do you know how many people would trade places with you? You've never been without food. You always have the best clothes, while the rest of the country is struggling to survive. You have no clue what suffering really is. You—" He blew out a hard breath, as if trying to calm himself. "I get it. You're young and sheltered and don't understand your privilege."

That may be true, but he twisted her words. Didn't he understand that she could still have nothing while having everything?

"I'm not—I can't be a mother right now."

"Unfortunately, it's not up to me. They'd take you away if they discovered we weren't trying. But I—" he grimaced. "I'll give you six months. It's all I can do."

*"Six months."*

The thought that she could be pregnant in six months made her sick to her stomach. He must hear the horror in her voice, because his body softened its hard lines.

"You won't be doing it alone. I'll be right by your side, as well as Tabitha and the elves. We'll hire night nurses if we need to or a wet nurse. It's my duty to my family to produce a child too. I've neglected it before now, but I can't any longer. Whether it's a boy or girl, it will be loved and cherished. And we only need to have one. We can wait a few years if we decide to have another. There's nothing to fear."

Panic, anger, despair. Her body didn't know which one to settle on. She swayed a bit, reaching out to steady herself against the bed. It looked like Titus wanted to get up to comfort her, but she didn't want to give him a reason to touch her ever again.

"Go away," she said.

"Sprite—"

"I need—I need space. Time to think."

He drew in a deep breath and stood up. He'd always towered over her. It used to make her feel safe.

What a fool she'd been.

*Stupid little doll.*

How many times did he have to betray her for her to learn? She'd never let her guard down again.

"I don't like seeing you upset. I wish you'd allow me—" He reached out a hand, and she recoiled, almost tripping over her feet to get away. "Very well," he said as he pulled down his shirt. "I'll leave you to think and accept what's to come."

There was a hard, bitter note to his voice, as if he was the one who was hurt. He gave one last sigh and then turned, exiting the room.

---

Hermione lay on her bed, resting her head in Tabitha's lap as her old nanny softly stroked her hair.

"Child, I'm going to need to tell you things that might shock you."

Hermione almost laughed. She knew this was coming by the way Tabitha hesitated. As much as she loved the woman, she was awful at preparing her for things. Her first period had been no different.

"I already know about sex."

The hand on her head stilled.

"How do you know?"

"Katie's Mistress told her, and she told me. The only thing I'm unsure about is if it is painful."

"I don't have personal experience. I never got married and don't have children of my own, but I'm told it can be."

"Is it painful after the first time?"

"I assume it isn't. I've never heard women complain about pain."

Hermione nodded and decided to have mercy on the poor old woman and change the subject, since it made her uncomfortable.

"Why is he doing this?" Hermione asked. All day she'd been close to crying. It was a dam in her soul, one that threatened to break her when it finally burst.

Hermione wished she was little again, when everything seemed so simple. When it was just her and Theo running wild on the grounds.

Her nanny sighed, going quiet for a long time before finally speaking.

"You have to understand what he was like as a young boy. You see, Titus wanted nothing more than to be a dragon knight like the stories his mother read, saving fair maidens from evil wizards." Tabitha gave a soft snort, as if living in a distant memory. "It broke his heart when he discovered it wasn't an option. I don't think I've ever met a more determined child. He seldom loved, but when he did, it was deep in his soul. You should have seen his face when he held Theo for the first time—completely besotted!" Tabitha paused, as if gathering her thoughts. "He always—he always wanted to save injured creatures. His favourite had

been a little bird that hurt its wing, falling from its nest. Titus spent every day nursing it back to health. No one helped him. The bird flourished, until one day it flew away. But— instead of being happy the bird was finally free, Titus felt betrayed it had left him. He thought his constant love was enough to gain him a loyal companion. Poor little fool."

"I don't understand what this has to do with me?" Hermione leaned into her nanny's touch, accepting the comfort.

"You're his bird, Hermione," she answered in a whisper. "You were given to him broken, and he healed you. I think he tried to accomplish it without loving you, knowing one day he'd have to release you, but—" She sighed. "His mother's death shattered him, but he only allowed himself a single day to grieve, and then he was back to trying to help Theo. He threw himself into becoming perfect, shutting himself off from everyone. I worried he'd never let himself love anyone ever again, afraid of the pain of loss. But then you came, and he found it impossible not to. You wiggled your way into his heart, gave him a purpose again, and I think he's terrified of losing you. Theo's growing up. I'm getting old. What would he do if everyone he loved flew away?" Her hand stopped moving. "I think I always knew that this day would come, and he'd be unable to release you, his love transforming as you grew. You used to have a puppy crush, so I just hoped one day—it doesn't matter, I suppose."

Hermione closed her eyes. She loved Titus. She would always love Titus, but she couldn't forgive him for this.

"He's wounding me," she said. "Not healing me."

"My dear Hermione," Tabitha said. "Though I understand his reasoning, I don't think he's making a wise choice, and I've told him so. I wish I could solve every ache in your soul, but this is one I cannot help you with. Titus won't listen to me. He's determined to win you, and I'm afraid the other competitors won't stand a chance against him. There are very good odds you'll be back home forever and will have to find a way to reconcile with Titus."

The future Tabitha painted was horrid, stuck wandering the manor. She'd be the ballerina trapped in the painting, spinning forever around and around.

*No*, Hermione decided, *no I won't*.

As the anger hardened her soul, an idea grew inside her mind.

*A vizard afraid of a vitch's magic does not deserve her.*

If Titus wanted a caged bird, then he didn't need to just defeat Malfoy and Krum.

He needed to defeat her too.

Drunk Titus by [Frau Blucher](#)

 Drunk Titus

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Dubious consent, grooming. Both of these are open to interpretation.

EDITED TO ADD: From now on, I'm deleting any comment that is 1) insulting or 2) shaming. This is not directed toward legit questions, concerns, or concrit. Also, this is not directed toward outrage at a character's actions. That's part of the fun of dark fics. But rude opinions directed toward readers or me WILL be deleted.

## Chapter 22: Beautiful Distraction

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Emeline – "this is how I learn to say no"

MyPrivateInsanity is the absolute best for spending her time looking over this chapter!

I wasn't able to respond to all of the comments like I'd planned last Sunday. When I started this story, I was getting around 20/ 30 reviews per chapter. Now it's over a 100! I'm thrilled with the amount, and I read each one and love each one, but it would be a full-time job responding to everything. So I'm going to be both limiting and shortening my responses, along with trying to respond more during the week, to make it easier on myself.

### Beautiful Distraction

Theo arrived three days later for dinner. He swooped inside, gave a nod to his brother, kissed Hermione's cheek, and sat beside her. He began to tear into his food as if starved.

"Merlin, no other elf cooks like Eddy."

Eddy was the kitchen elf. Unlike Bitty, he didn't like to be seen, so after cooking, he'd slink off into his quarters.

Theo paused his eating once he noticed the strained silence. He glanced back and forth between Titus and Hermione.

"What's going on?"

Titus only grimaced briefly. "I'll tell you if you promise you'll be mature about it."

Theo stiffened and looked at Hermione. She could barely look back at him.

"Titus is starting my Trials."

Theo's mouth popped open, and his eyes went wide. He shot out of his chair so abruptly that it tipped over, clattering on the floor.

"What?"

"Sit down, Theo," Titus said calmly, but his grave expression showed he struggled with it himself. Titus had dreaded telling Theo, knowing it wouldn't be received well. They already had a strained relationship, and this would put more pressure on it.

Hermione wasn't about to lessen the pressure, no matter how bad Titus wanted her to.

"Why the fuck would you do that?" he yelled. "You know she doesn't want to yet."

"There are many reasons for it, and I'm certain you'd wilfully misunderstand all of them."

Theo's face turned bright red from anger.

"Oh, I think I understand *perfectly*. I've understood for a while. I'm not blind. You included your fucking token, didn't you?" He didn't wait for Titus to confirm his suspicions. "It'll serve you right if Hermione stabs you in your sleep, and I might hand her the knife."

Titus blew out a hard breath.

"I'm doing what's best. I love—"

"Love?" Theo stepped away from the table and placed one hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I can't—I don't have any power to stop him." He grew quiet for a moment, as if processing everything, and then he kicked a table leg. "Fuck, Titus, this is one of the worst decisions you've ever made! I can't stand to be here any longer, or I might curse you. Why do you have to ruin fucking *everything*?"

She didn't want Theo to leave, but she understood. If she could, she'd leave too.

Theo kissed her on the cheek a second time, giving a comforting squeeze to her shoulder. "I'm going to see if I can do anything about this. If you need me, I'm always a floo call away." He sneered at his brother. "That is if he'd even let you floo call me."

It was a sweet sentiment, but Theo could do nothing to help her. She never thought he could.

Titus gave a derisive snort.

"Both of you are dramatic," Titus said. "Barely anything at all will change."

Theo glared and then stomped out of the room without responding. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Titus shoved his plate away, and then pinched the bridge of his nose. "He'll be back," he said, as if trying to convince himself of that. Then he glanced up at her. "I'd never prevent you from communicating with him. You can floo call him anytime you want to."

The anger inside her was so hot she wouldn't be surprised to find steam billowing from her ears.

"Floo call him anytime I want? *Thanks ever so*," Hermione bit out. "Should I crawl into your lap now in awe of your benevolence?"

His nostrils flared.

"That sounds pleasant to me." His glare could melt ice. "And then while you're at it, you could beg me *please* again, instead of acting like such a little brat."

They hadn't had a normal conversation since the day he'd initiated the Trials. He had tried, of course, but she'd rather chew glass than be nice to him. Her continuous animosity wore down his usual control.

Titus picked up his wine glass, but when he began to sip, she obeyed her angry impulse, squeezing her fist with intention.

The glass exploded, sending shards across the table, and wine splashed against his body. Despite being petty, it satisfied her to see him sputtering in shock.

He wiped away the red wine dripping from his chin. "Keep acting like a child, and I promise I'll punish you like one."

"Try and punish me and I'll charm spiders in your shoes— or maybe I'll use real ones."

"Do that and I'll put you in time out. My bed, perhaps? You'd need to stay in it for an hour before I'd let you out."

"I'd put a potion in your shampoo to make your hair fall out."

"Two hours."

Hermione picked up her steak knife and ran her finger along the sharp edge.

"Did you know that after mating, a female praying mantis will often bite off the male's head? I thought you'd be interested in that fact."

"You are a veritable fount of knowledge," he said in a flat voice. "But if your intention was to threaten me, then I must inform you that violence *entices* me."

Why did he have to say things in a way that made her body tingle? She had to shut it down. The stakes were too high.

"You'll regret it if you win my Trials. I'll intentionally make you miserable every day for the rest of your life."

He looked her over slowly, his gaze touching every curve of her face, as if savouring it.

"I enjoy your disobedience." He leaned forward. "Because it'll make it that much more satisfying when I teach you the *benefits* of submission."



She hated her traitorous body. How it burned with his promise. How it hijacked her mind for just a moment, causing her to wonder about the benefits. But her logical mind understood that the benefits of staying with Titus ended when she exited his bed.

---

The morning of her Trials, Hermione woke before dawn. She took a moment to stare at her room, her attention lingering on her photographs and treasures. Her old artwork. The gifts from Titus and Theo over the years. She picked up each item and set it down, wondering if it would be a goodbye for now, or a goodbye for forever. If Titus won two trials today, then by early in the morning— if it was similar to Katie's—he'd bring her back home.

She still didn't know much about the Trials. Just stolen bits and pieces. Four planned contests, though not all of them are guaranteed to play out. At least three competitors.

The ritual night.

The ominous feeling overwhelmed her again, remembering a black galleon warmed in her palm. She thought about trying to escape, but she doubted she'd get far. Titus would hunt her down, and then he might deny her what she wanted. And where would she even go? The panic rose up in her chest, but she shoved it down, determined to see her plan through.

Instead of her usual dress, she put on black trousers meant for duelling and a form-fitting top. She gathered her voluminous curly hair and braided it down her back to get it out of her face. Her dragon hide boots were last, fitting like a glove. As a final precaution, she strapped her wand to her forearm under the band of her shirt.

When she walked out of the room, she shoved down a quick breakfast without sitting and then went to the front sitting room where the floo resided. Titus already waited near the fireplace, dressed all in black like her. He wore his typical auror outfit with his armour sans cloak and mask.

He studied her as she walked forward. A smile tugged up the side of his lip, and she had to withhold the instinct to swipe it off.

Crookshanks was rubbing off on her.

"What are you planning, Sprite?"

She tried not to fidget under his inspection. She didn't know if he'd be angry with what she intended— or if it was even allowed— but she also didn't know if she cared anymore.

"I'm participating."

A snort broke his serious mien.

"Are you?"

"Yes. If you can't beat me, then you don't deserve me."

"Very well."

Having expected more of a fight, she glanced up at him in confusion. She'd prepared to argue her point, and if he'd refused her, she'd decided to somehow sabotage the Trials toward whatever contestant she desired. Him letting her participate without protest threw her off.

"Really?"

"It's tradition for the witch to participate if she wants. Most don't, but it helps witches with stronger wills to settle faster. I'm glad you've decided to compete before I even offered. It shows your fighting spirit."

Hermione grit her teeth. The assurance behind his tone grated on her nerves, as if she was a child playing at something meant for grown-ups. Adorable. Not an actual threat. Just a little whim to be indulged to keep hope in place, so that when it was finally cut away, there would be nothing left.

"What if I win?"

"You won't—"

"What. If. I. Win?"

He paused and looked her over.

"It's just a meaningless tradition. I doubt you even could officially win. Your friend Katie participated too. I suppose it's all right for me to mention this now. She nearly even outflew Flint—the closest any witch has gotten to winning. The Overseers and I were impressed. But when it came to the next Trial, she stood no chance. Not without a real wand."

She could just imagine Katie's rage at losing. She'd always been competitive, especially when it came to quidditch or flying.

"You didn't answer my question."

"You won't be getting out of your duties, if that's what you're thinking. But I suppose — *hypothetically*— you'd get to choose the wizard. The rules aren't set, since there's never been any need."

*Choose the wizard.* It wasn't much, but it was a small agency she ached for. Desperation and determination built walls inside her heart. The magic stirred in her veins at just the idea.

"Not that your promises mean much, but I want an oath that if I win, you'll honour what you just told me. A choice for a win."

"Will that help soothe the sting of loss?"

"It might."

She lied. Nothing would soothe her anger toward him for starting her Trials early.

He gave a nod. It wasn't a formal agreement, but Hermione knew that was as much as she'd get from him.

Who would she choose if given a chance? That was the tricky question. She wanted to say Malfoy, but could she really trust him? Titus' betrayal made it hard to trust. If he could break a promise, then anyone could. Despite years of letters, she didn't know Draco well enough. And Viktor... he had kind eyes, but she no longer depended on her judgement of character in people.

"Well, unlike Katie, I'm bringing a wand, and I'm going to use it too."

Again, his eyes dismantled her. Her nerves buzzed with a mixture of fury and dread. He reached out to touch her cheek, but as she had for the last week, she shuffled out of the way just in time. His jaw clenched, and he dropped his hand into a curled fist.

"I assume you think I'd be a *tyrant* and deny you." He took a step toward her, and she retreated another. She never wanted to be touched by him again. "But I'll let you have a wand. It's already been pre-approved by the overseers. Go ahead and fight. Use all the intelligence and fierceness you possess— every bit of strength and magic— because I don't want you to wonder if you could have ever won against me."

"Did you rig the Trials?" Hermione asked, no longer wanting to hedge around her suspicions. "And don't lie to me. I'll be able to tell."

He stopped and stared at her for a long time, as if debating what to reveal.

"I've tried to," he admitted. "They all owe me favours. I have some wiggle room, and I plan to collect my payment by the end of the day, if I can." He sighed. "But Lucius has also secured favours from all of the overseers, which can potentially cancel some of it out. Or not. I have a plan to win, of course. But— we'll see. Does that satisfy you?"

Not really.

"I suppose."

It did arm her with more information than she had before. So he could call in favours, as long as it didn't undermine Lucius? What leeway did that give him? Hermione was tired of being moved around like a pawn. It was time she started becoming a player in her own game. She decided if she had a choice that she'd pick Viktor and move far, far away to Bulgaria.

Hermione hardened her determination as he stepped out of the way, and they both entered the floo.

---

They travelled to an old section in the bowels of the ministry, a place formerly used to train new recruits to the DMLE. Cold sliced through her, the type that took her breath away even with warming charms. She controlled her shivering, not wanting to show Titus any weakness while stomping in front of him, denying him the right to walk beside her.

It might be petty. It might be childish. But it felt good. His frustrated frown at her lack of affection made it all worthwhile.

When they went past the double doors, Hermione pulled to a stop, examining the room. It was large and mostly empty. A long table was off to the side near the wall, on a slightly raised dais, already filled with the four men overseeing her Trial. Their function was to make sure the contestants followed the rules, and their memories were subject to examination by the courts in case an allegation of cheating was made. She knew their names by sight:

Macnair.

Goyle Senior.

Dolohov.

Snape.

The last one made her take an instant step back, as a horrid thought crept up her spine.

*They all owe me favours.*

The only favour she could think of was the botched inquiry of James Potter. Her insides turned woozy at the thought. Did Titus kill Harry's father on purpose so that he had a judge in his pocket? Or did he just open an investigation for a quid pro quo, and it went horribly wrong? What else did he do to secure the judges? It was too insidious to consider.

Hermione shook her head, attempting to clear her mind. She'd think about the possibility later. Right now, she couldn't afford the distraction. She needed to concentrate on the task ahead.

Hermione crossed her arms and took deep, calming breaths while she waited, attempting to meditate her fears away while waiting for the other contestants.

Viktor arrived first, in clothes similar to Titus, armour wrapped around his torso, except for a crest sewn in red and a lining of fur around the collar. When he met her eyes, he gave a bashful grin. The tops of his cheeks turned slightly red.

"Hello, Herm-own-ninny."

"Hello," she said back, feeling equally shy.

It was odd to see him again, looking much fiercer, having grown into his heavy features. He was shorter than Titus, but bulkier, with wide shoulders, buzzed hair, and eyes just as kind as she remembered. The thought that she might have to go home with this man—a stranger—to another country—was too surreal to comprehend. She didn't know the language, culture, or history. She really should have researched Bulgaria more.

Viktor said nothing further to her, but went to the front to fill out the paperwork. She assumed Titus had already completed his when he turned in the tokens.

When Malfoy entered beside his father, her stomach swooped low. Lucius grabbed his shoulder as they crossed the threshold, talking low to him. Draco nodded at certain points. They were the same height now and of a similar build, except Draco had clipped his hair short on the sides, leaving it tousled on top. He looked handsome in his body armour, the pitch black contrasting with his pale skin. His cheekbones seemed sharper than she remembered, reminding her of his angel-monster father, who'd haunted her dreams as a child.

She looked him over for any sign of stress—a tremble of his hand, a clench of his jaw—but after his father left, he swaggered to the front to fill out his paperwork, giving her a wink along the way.

"You look lovely this morning, *Hermione*."

"Don't talk to her," Titus warned. "Don't even look at her."

Draco just gave him a cocky, mocking grin before going along his way.

Hermione envied his confidence. It oozed from him. He moved forward with assurance, as if he wasn't the underdog in the race.

When he finished signing his scrolls, he went to stand by Viktor. He took out his wand and twirled it in his hands, as if fidgeting helped him think. As soon as he stood still, his face went blank in an eerie way. Theo told her once that Draco was a natural occlumens, and with personal training from his father and Snape, he'd become a master. Not even his Aunt Bellatrix, a formidable legilimens, could break through his mental walls.

She wondered what went on under the mask. Wondered what would happen if she cracked it open.

After rolling up the scrolls they'd signed, Snape put them away.

"Is the girl participating?" Dolohov asked in a raspy voice that caused a chill to cascade across her body. She'd heard a lot about him, but this was the first time she'd seen him up close. He had dark hair with pale skin and a pointed beard, resembling an overgrown rat. Her instincts warned that she stood in the presence of a predator.

"Yes," Titus answered, crossing his arms along his chest.

Dolohov gave a nod. Apparently, she didn't need to sign anything like the men.

"What's in the contract?" Hermione asked Titus, while waiting for the formal time to begin.

"Just a liability agreement in case of permanent injury or death."

"Death?"

"Just a precaution," he said. "The Trials can be dangerous and sometimes accidents occur."

"So you won't be trying to... kill each other."

"Lucky for Malfoy, no. Certain Trials will require magic, and in others, magic is banned. The contracts prove that the competitors entered the Trials of their own free will, and if something does happen, the families can't retaliate for the loss of a son, especially from the old families."

"If it's so dangerous, why am I allowed to compete?"

"You'll be wrapped with so many charms specific to each Trial, nothing will be able to hurt you."

"Okay— so I can't get hurt, but no one else has charms. Has death really ever occurred?"

"A few times. Don't worry, Sprite. Nothing will happen to me." He touched her arm, but she shoved it off, much to his consternation.

"Maybe I'm worried for Malfoy."

His face dropped from its grin into a dark glare.

"Maybe you should be."

A cough for attention interrupted anything she could reply, and they all turned their attention to the front when Snape stood up. He looked impossibly bored.

"Before we begin, I am going to go over the rules one more time." He looked at each of them as if they were unruly school children. "There will be no fighting or duelling in between Trials, and there will be no fighting other competitors within the Trial, unless otherwise stated. The first Trial will happen this morning. After a break for lunch, we'll have the second Trial. If need be, the Trials will be extended into a second day. As you know, the first competitor to win two trials wins the muggleborn. The results can be appealed, but only if there's substantial evidence of cheating." He stopped and glanced around. "Any questions?"

No one made a noise or movement, but Hermione slowly raised her hand. Snape turned a withering glare toward her.

"This is not Hogwarts—*thankfully*— so there's no need to raise your hand so eagerly, Ms. Hermione."

"I have a question."

"Of course you do."

Hermione withheld her spike of irritation. Even if she didn't loathe his entire existence, his prickly personality rubbed her the wrong way.

"What are the challenges? And do we get to choose them?"

Snape narrowed his eyes.

"Shortly after the tokens had been entered, we'd owed out a list of ten Trials that the competitors could choose from. They'd pre-selected their favourite and sent it back several days ago to be approved."

"So all three of the men got to select one Trial, but what about the fourth? How will that be chosen? And how will we decide who gets to go first?"

"Are you always so incessant with questions?"

Hermione felt chagrined, her cheeks heating. She lifted her chin, unwilling to be embarrassed by the man.

"Yes," she said. "These are *my* Trials, therefore, I deserve to know what is to come."

At her firm response, Dolohov gave her a grin that reminded her of a Manticore. He tilted his head, studying her. She didn't like his eyes roaming her body, though they didn't seem to have a lecherous edge, more so interested. They felt like knives, as if he wished to peel back her skin to see her veins.

Snape sighed, making it clear that this was the last place he wished to be.

"In the case of only three tokens, the fourth Trial is set by the judges. It's the same every time. Most Trials end earlier."

Snape reached down and tugged up a small cauldron, and then he reached in his robe and took out the three tokens.

"To make the Trials fair, we use a randomizer charm."

It was a common charm for gambling. Usually, it scrambled numbers or objects in a random way to prevent cheating and create a fair environment.

He held up each token—the Nott crest, the Malfoy crest, the Krum crest. They gleamed as he dropped each one inside the cauldron. A thick smoke erupted, covering the top.

After letting the smoke drift away, Snape stuck his hand inside the cauldron and pulled out a token. He glanced down at it, and then opened his palm, showing the Krum crest.

"Viktor Krum," Snape drawled. "You have the honour of first choice. Inform the other competitors which Trial you've chosen, and then we'll wait for the elves to finish the final preparations before using a portkey to move to the new location."

Viktor grinned, pulling a miniature broom from his pocket, which expanded to full size as he lifted it in the air. "Flying."

---

An hour later, they lined up in front of an extended quidditch pitch, four times the length of a normal one. One hoop stood lonely in the distance. Bludgers hung in the air, already vibrating. She didn't recognize the location, but the cold wind whipped around her, shifting her braid back and forth.

Titus stood next to Hermione. "You don't have to do this. No one will think less of you if you bow out."

Out of everyone, he knew best how much she loathed flying.

Hermione had already gone through a solid twenty minutes of panic. She didn't need another voice of doubt on top of it. She didn't just hate flying. Her whole body revolted at the thought of being in the air.

For the past ten minutes, she'd trembled, holding a borrowed broom, looking at the impossible task ahead of her. Of course Viktor would choose flying. He was a professional quidditch player. Add to that, both Titus and Malfoy were great flyers, having been quidditch captains in school.

The only person who would fail at this task was her.

She didn't think it would be a simple fly around either. She knew hidden surprises lurked—dangers created to increase the challenge.

It made despair eat through her earlier determination. Her very first challenge, and she'd fail it. It was a foregone conclusion. Maybe Titus had been right. Maybe this was a meaningless tradition. How could she compete against three talented wizards who'd been given every privilege of magical knowledge when she'd just stolen tidbits here and there, begging for more scraps to be thrown her way?

Still, she tightened her hold on the broom handle, unwilling to concede defeat so early.

"I'm doing this."

Titus sighed, but he nodded. The ministry elves had already placed all sorts of repellent and cushioning charms on her. And when she thought they were done, Titus put several more. They might as well have wrapped her in a bubble for all the protections on her at the moment.

The broom felt unforgiving under her fingertips, and she resisted the desire to clench against the wood.

*Hold it lightly*, she remembered Theo telling her it once. *Too tight and you'll overcompensate when turning.*

"As we are about to begin, I'm going to go over the rules of this specific Trial," Dolohov announced from the sidelines, wearing a thick fur coat with matching hat, resembling a bear. The other overseers stood near him, bracing themselves against the wind. "If you attempt to lift off the ground before the bell, you will be automatically disqualified. Since this is a skill-based Trial, no magic will be allowed on the quidditch pitch. Any use of magic, especially against an opponent, will earn an automatic disqualification, though you may use your broom and body to knock off an opponent if you are able. The goal is simple—the first person to fly through the hoop at the far end of the pitch will win." He paused. "Are we all in agreement with the rules?"



The men next to her each gave one swift nod, showing their acceptance. She gave her own, though she knew it didn't matter.

"Very well." Dolohov made a motion to the elves with a sharp wave of his hand. "The Trial will start in ten seconds."

Hermione braced her feet and crouched, wishing she'd gotten over her fear of flying long ago, wishing she'd taken advantage of Theo's constant attempts at lessons. She sensed Titus stare at her as she bent low over her broom. He straddled his own, looking grave.

Her teeth clenched just as a bell sounded, so loud she felt it in her bones. The men shot off into the air. Hermione followed, but she already knew she couldn't keep up.

Just as she suspected, dangers lay in wait.

A torrent of fire whipped by Viktor. He yelled as he was caught in the firestream, but he didn't slow down as the bristles on his broom sparked and sizzled. He barrel-rolled to avoid a bludger, crouching lower as he accelerated to an impossible speed.

A metal spike shot up from the ground, almost impaling Draco, but, like Viktor, he elegantly twisted around it.

Hermione withheld her gasp, the shock almost causing her to pause. That could have killed him. She knew that the players risked bodily injury and death, but Hermione assumed it was liability for rare accidents. But fire and metal spikes?

Hermione flew along at a tortoise's pace compared to the rabbits before her, and unlike the fable, she wouldn't win. She strangled her broom with her hands, knowing it wouldn't help her. She waited for a spike or a bludger, but after flying close to the center of the pitch, she realised nothing was attacking her. Hermione didn't know whether to be relieved or offended at the kid gloves they used with her.

While Viktor flew beautifully, twisting and turning, Titus flew methodically, only doing what he must. He whipped his broom around as if to dominate it.

Now right behind Viktor, Titus used his broom, impressively diving and stopping right before a bludger, whacking it forward— a perfect shot. It slammed into Viktor, causing him to spin for a moment, losing the lead as Titus levelled his broom and shot forward, showing off his reflexes as a spike hurtled at his side, missing by inches. The hoop was in sight, but the closer they got toward the end, the more obstacles blocked them.

Unlike Titus and Viktor, Draco didn't seem to be in a hurry, hanging at the tail end. Having seen him play quidditch several times, she knew he could be much faster, so the odd behaviour drew her attention. As she watched, a net flew at Draco, but it missed as he zoomed to the left at top speed. But as soon as the danger vanished, so did his pace.

Soon enough, he had slowed so much that he hovered near her. She glared up at him, sensing something off.

"What are you—"

"Catch!" Draco twisted down, and—just like Titus—the bristles on his black firebolt caught a bludger. The quidditch ball flew toward her at such a significant speed she had no way to avoid the impact.

It smacked into her. The surprise made her cry out as she tumbled off her broom. Unused to quidditch, her hands lifted away and she began to freefall.

Draco swooped at lightning fast speed.

"Got you!" He grabbed her along the waist and somehow pulled her right in front of him, pressed tight to his chest, one hand splayed along her stomach.

It took a moment for Hermione to realise she was still screaming.

"Shh," he whispered in her ear. "You're not falling anymore."

"You absolute arse!" She twisted and tried to smack him, but he dodged each blow, except a few whacks on his shoulder.

"Calm down, Granger, you aren't hurt."

He was right—the charms deflected the Bludger. The recoil of it had caused her to fall. Her fear still buzzed along her skin, and she felt nauseous, but her brain began to work again.

"Why the fuck did you do that?"

"To hold you in my arms, of course."

Her eye twitched, wondering if there was a person in the universe more infuriating.

"But you lost the race," she said, unable to understand why he did that.

"Krum's a professional, Granger. And Titus is a trained auror. I'm great at flying. I might even be on par with Titus, but I'm not an idiot. I'm a strategist, and there wasn't any need to waste my energy." He sounded amused, as if he knew a joke she didn't. "Besides, why would I desire to win this when I could hold close the most beautiful *distraction*?"

He made no sense.

The bell sounded. Hermione's eyes popped up. She hadn't even paid attention to the rest of the Trial, too focused on Draco.

Viktor hovered right on the opposite side of the hoop with one fist raised in the air in triumph. Titus levitated close to him, eyes full of rage. But the fury wasn't directed at Viktor, it was directed in her direction.

The race must have been close. They were both sweaty and red, panting in deep gulping breaths.

Viktor won the first challenge.

She didn't know what to feel.

"Perfect," Draco said behind her. She glanced back to find him grinning slyly, as if everything worked out according to his plan.

"I thought you wanted to win. Why would you be happy for Krum?" She asked.

"I *am* winning."

Titus flew toward them, low and fast. Without impediments, it only took a few seconds.

"How dare you fucking touch her," he yelled when he got close enough.

"She fell from her broom, Nott. What was I supposed to do? Don't worry, she's safe in my arms." He tugged her tight to his body, and Titus nearly snapped, hand hovered over his wand.

Draco drifted toward the ground slowly, and Titus followed. Their feet had barely touched the ground before Titus yanked her off the broom and into his hold.

Most men would cower before an irate Titus, but Draco straightened, looking him in his eyes.

"You need to start controlling your temper," Draco said. "It's so hard to *concentrate* when you're angry."

*A beautiful distraction.*

Titus had been in the lead when she'd last seen him, zooming toward the hoop. Did her scream make him slow down enough that Viktor pulled ahead?

Or was it the sight of her flying pressed close to Draco, with his fingers splayed along her stomach?

Whatever the reason, she understood now that Draco was responsible for Titus' loss.

"Pull a stunt like that again, Malfoy, and I'll gut you and your father too."

---

When they arrived back at the Ministry by portkey, Viktor gave her a broad smile that was hard not to match. He was clutching his side, and when he lifted his hand off, it was covered in blood.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

"It is only a scratch." He winced, but he withdrew his wand and cast a basic healing spell. When they had a break, he'd need to stop by a healer and have them patch it up properly.

"How does it feel to finally lose at something, Nott?" Draco taunted, stepping closer to them than he should.

Titus' mouth twitched, but he didn't react, keeping his face impassive. He let his eyes linger on Hermione.

"It won't happen again." It was said so low, so seriously, that it caused her body to prickle.

Titus had something planned this time.

Hermione suspected the first challenge wasn't as important as she thought it might be. Draco didn't seem concerned over Viktor's win. He'd only cared that Titus *lost*. But why?

Snape and the four overseers sat on the dais at their table. The cauldron was in the center, already smoking.

"It is now time to select the next Trial," Snape drawled. "After that, we'll have a brief break for lunch and any minor medical care you need. We will meet back here for the second Trial of the day in the afternoon."

Titus' hand flexed. It was subtle, but she'd been reading his subtle hints for years.

Excitement.

Snape dipped his hand into the cauldron. As he dug around, the realisation hit Hermione.

She knew Titus must have called in one of his favours to be the next token.

Viktor picked something he wouldn't lose at. There was only one thing Titus was a prodigy at.

Snape withdrew the token.

"Titus Nott."

The name burned her insides, knowing what was to come.

Titus' glanced at her, finally open enough for her to view his thoughts without digging them out: a smug satisfaction, a deep affection— an apology.

"What challenge have you chosen for your Trial?" Snape asked.

Titus held her stare. His wand hand flexed again.

"Duelling."

Draco and Hermione at the Trials by [Cabrlita10](#)

 Draco  Hermione



## Chapter 23: Of Gods and Mortals

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Sickick– "G.O.M.D." The music video is perfect for this chapter. How can a jawline be so attractive?

Trigger warnings at the bottom!

Round of applause to MyPrivateInsanity for being the best beta in the world!

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

### Of Gods and Mortals

They went home for lunch. Hermione still refused to speak to Titus as she chewed her food, though she felt his eyes on her, flaying her open as he always did.

"Tell me, Sprite—" he leaned back in his chair. "What will be so bad or different after I win?"

It wasn't that it was inherently bad, *or* that it would be different. It was the lack of choice in the matter. She'd been resigned to the Trials at the age of twenty-one, because she'd *chosen* it. She'd held that small agency in the palm of her hand, curling her fingers around it for protection, and one by one he'd peeled back each digit until it lay exposed, and then he plucked it away for himself.

But she didn't say any of this. Instead, she stabbed an asparagus spear, eating off the top part and leaving the rest. A crawling serving dish tried to give her another spoonful of potatoes, and she shooed it away.

Her soul longed for more than the manor walls, and she discovered too late that Titus would never give it to her. In his quest to carry his bird to safety, he was suffocating her.

Without her engagement in conversation, Titus sighed and threw his napkin on the table.

"You have an hour to rest before we need to return."

With his exit, Hermione grimaced at the table, her eyes following the subtle grain in the wood.

---

An hour later, Titus met her at the fireplace. He leaned against it in his auror body armour, black and fitted, showing off every line in his body.

There was no denying Titus Nott was the top of the food chain, a magnificent representation of a human male physique. A part of her, low in her stomach, would always find him attractive—the young girl inside her soul that desired his attention and approval.

She stepped up to the fireplace, but before she could grab the floo powder, he gripped her wrist and twisted her so that her back pressed against the edge of the marble mantel. He tilted her chin up with the edge of his finger and leaned down, so they were eye to eye.

"If the world was different, I'd do everything you asked of me. I'd tell the Wizengamot to fuck off and leave both of us alone." He looked toward the ceiling a moment, before returning her gaze. "The reality is that I have some power, but I don't have enough to keep you from the Trials. Sure, I could step out of the way and let Malfoy or Krum fight over you. And then after one of them won you, I'd lose any ability to see you ever again, without any guarantee he'd treat you right. Don't you see? I *refuse* to see a future without you in it. So I'm sorry I started the Trials early. I'm sorry if it hurt your soul in a way I didn't anticipate. Blame me for the rest of our lives if you must, but I'd still have fought for you if I'd waited too."

Hermione trembled. She wished she didn't. She wished her body didn't display any weakness. But in this position, she was vulnerable.

She'd always been vulnerable. She just hadn't known it.

"You make it sound as if you're guaranteed to win."

"That depends on if the spoiled wanker is as clever as he thinks he is."

He didn't mention Viktor, as if he didn't consider him a threat, and she wondered why.

"He's smarter than you." She didn't know if that was true, but the irritation it brought out was worth it.

His white teeth flashed.

"It won't matter. He can lose today or tomorrow. The result is the same, because this isn't a game to me."

"You'll need to beat me too." Hermione lifted her chin higher. "I'm not going to go easy on you."

He gave her a half-smile, showing he thought what she said was endearing.

"I hope so. Fight me. I want you to."

Titus glanced at the small clock on the mantle, and then pressed his fingers into her cheeks, dragging her closer, as if about to kiss her.

"It's time you see why everyone fears me."

---

Hermione walked into the Trial room just daring someone to mention her wand. Titus had obviously already informed the overseers like he'd told her, because they didn't even look her way, ignoring the wand in her hand. Not for the first time did she wonder what favours he did to obtain feigned ignorance from some of the most powerful people in the government.

Viktor only grinned at her wand, eyes trailing along her form. He seemed to approve of the development.

*A wizard afraid of a witch's magic doesn't deserve her.*

Remembering Viktor's injury, she studied him for pain. He'd had time to get the wound patched up, but she bet it still hurt, which would give him a disadvantage. Viktor seemed like a man who enjoyed a challenge even if he feared it. Much like Titus, he wasn't used to losing.

On the other hand, Draco seemed bored. He tossed his wand up and caught it like he would a snitch. Hermione wanted to grab his cocky shoulders and shake some sense into him. He'd never been as afraid of Titus as he should be. He'd been raised spoiled, and despite his early loss, he expected life to keep working out in his favour.

*Fated.*

The word made Hermione want to rage. She was a realist. Wand against wand, Titus would be the victor. Or, at least, she thought he would. She really had no idea what Draco's abilities were. She didn't think he'd be completely useless. Not only was he top of his class, but he'd been offered a spot as an auror after Hogwarts, which he'd declined. Not to mention, he'd been raised by Lucius Malfoy— one of the only men Titus hesitated to anger.

Hermione ignored them all, taking deep breaths to center herself. She didn't think she'd win today. Titus had the clear upper hand.

But something bothered her. It had bothered her since lunch, though she couldn't put her finger on it.

Maybe it was Titus' demeanour. He was twisting his wand around his fingers, eyes unfocused. He looked like a general entering a battlefield, sussing out the weaknesses of his opponents, the correct blows to cut the feet out from under them. Plan A. Plan B. And Plan C.

If she wanted to win, she'd need to disrupt it somehow.

A familiar cough interrupted her thoughts. At the dais, Snape already eyed them with complete loathing. Hermione wondered if that was his natural expression or if he was perpetually constipated.

"In ten minutes, the Trial will begin. During the duel, all curses will be allowed, except for level three curses, which includes the Unforgiveables and any others that result in irreversible injury. A win will not be considered final until the opponent is either disarmed, steps out of bounds, or is otherwise incapacitated."



Everyone nodded their agreement to the rules.

After his speech, a scoreboard hovered above the overseers. Draco's name and Viktor's name were on the left side, showing they'd be the first duel. She and Titus were paired on the right side, and she didn't think that was by accident. Whoever won their respective fights would face off as the last duel.

Hermione stilled, sensing someone's stare. Draco eyes were bright as metal in the muted light. He cocked his head to the side, as if doing invisible calculations.

---

The room transformed into a circular, raised duelling arena, which gave more room for movement than the traditional rectangular platform.

Viktor and Draco climbed onto the platform and faced each other, positioned on opposite sides. The elves had already fortified their respective body armors, making it so most curses rebounded if close to essential organs.

"Are you ready?" Viktor asked.

Draco had the audacity to roll his eyes.

A hologram of the number five appeared between them. As it flashed red, it changed to four — a countdown.

Viktor crouched in preparation, but Draco remained standing, picking at his nails, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"Vot are you doing, Malfoy? It is about to start."

Draco only shrugged.

The three flashed. The two flashed brighter. Then the one. And then the zero. The bell rang, reverberating through the hall.

"Expelliarmus," Viktor cried.

There was no blue Protego. No deflection. Draco's wand hurtled in the air and clattered on the floor across the room.

Hermione stared at the discarded wand and then flicked her eyes back to Draco. He had both his hands in the air with a sly grin. He didn't look like someone who'd just lost.

"Why would you lose on purpose?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said, with his grin stuck in place. "You beat me fair and square."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Viktor didn't win. Not really. She glanced beside her at Titus, who stood with his arms crossed, face in a cold mask. The only hint at his true emotions was

a slight downward tilt to his lips. Something about what just happened made him deeply unhappy.

Viktor hopped down from the floating circle, looking troubled, and Draco did the same. He stayed unbothered as she stomped forward and placed her wand at his nose.

"Accio your wand and fight him again."

It bothered her that he let his wand fly. For the second Trial in a row, he'd lost on purpose. None of it made any sense.

"Rules are rules, love" he said.

It occurred to her then that he'd lost so he wouldn't have to fight against Titus. She reined in her anger, trying to look at it from a logical perspective, and lowered her wand.

"I thought you said you weren't afraid of Titus."

"I'm not afraid. I've already told you that I'm a strategist, Granger." Draco leaned close to her. "Could I win against Titus? Possibly. But it would cost a lot, and the odds aren't in my favour."

"But now you'll have to win the next two."

"Winning is just about statistical advantage. There's a formula for it." Draco raised an eyebrow. "Today, I'll let him have his ego trip."

Hermione opened her mouth to ask more questions, but a heavy hand landed on her shoulder and tugged her back and away from Draco and against Titus' hard chest.

"I can't quite tell if you're clever, or if you're a coward," Titus said.

To Draco's credit, he didn't back down. He only straightened.

"You can believe whatever you want."

"Bowling out to me is a very wise thing to do." Titus' hand transferred from her shoulder to her neck. "We're up next, Sprite. I'll let you have a few minutes extra to prepare if you need it."

The magic pounded in her veins with her frustration, vibrating inside her. The adrenaline spiked it, a potent mixture of conflicting energy that wanted to be used.

"I don't need to prepare."

Titus' thumb brushed along the side of her neck. Draco watched the movement. For a second, an emotion broke through. It was dark and heavy as storm clouds, but it dissipated quickly.

Titus leaned down, lips brushing against her ear.

"I think I'm going to enjoy fighting you."

She was going to enjoy it too.

If he wanted a fight, then she'd give him a fight.

---

Now in the duelling circle, Hermione faced Titus. He had his wand out, held loosely in his hand. He slid his left foot slightly forward, but she knew from experience it gave her no clues on what he'd cast or where. Furthermore, he was ambidextrous, so he could switch hands and curve a spell before she could block it.

But she had her own advantages.

Number one: she'd been studying him for years. No matter how quick, he still held a slight pattern. He tended to start on the right and only switched when needed. If he curved a spell, it tended to come from his left. He also liked to overuse offensive spells, only using Protegos for as long as it took to block a spell.

Number two: out of anyone, he wouldn't want to hurt her, which meant he'd use soft spells meant to subdue and not to break. He'd be careful. Hopefully, too careful.

Number three: he had no idea what she actually knew, giving her the advantage of surprise.

She didn't want to hurt Titus. She just wanted to punish him— wanted to show him how it felt to be betrayed.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Titus didn't know her as well as he thought he did if he believed she'd back down from a challenge.

She bent her knees like he'd taught her. And in lieu of an answer, pointed her wand at him, stating her intention to fight.

Titus nodded his acceptance and made a motion to Snape.

The countdown began.

Hermione watched the numbers flash. Her heart rate increased with each red number. Time seemed to slow as they waited.

The bell rang. Within seconds, she threw up a protego just as a nonverbal blue spell smashed against it. She held the spell, knowing as soon as she let it go, he'd attack with something heavier.

"I'm impressed with the strength you're holding the protego, but you're going to exhaust yourself."

Protegos always came easier to her. But defensive spells wouldn't win her this duel. She viewed him through the blue haze. He kept his gnarled wand pointed in her direction in an

almost lazy manner, but she wasn't a fool to fall for it. She'd seen how deadly fast he could be, with perfect aim.

An idea came to her.

She twisted her wrist near her hip, transferring the spell to her wandless magic. A small shimmer was the only indication she switched. She kept the wand pointed at him.

In one motion, she lowered the shield, and pretended to use her wand. Instead, she fired a stupefy by flicking up with her wrist. The attack surprised him, but it—unfortunately—missed.

He righted himself and swatted away her next curse with a move of his arm so fast she almost missed it.

They stood there, staring at each other. She resisted the desire to pant, already feeling out of breath.

A grin lit up his face.

"You're better than I thought you'd be," he said.

A jerk under her feet almost made her tumble. She scrambled for balance, and somehow remained upright as the black platform under her feet began to turn.

"What's happening?" She asked.

Luckily for her, Titus couldn't capitalise on her vulnerable wobble as he was dealing with his own balance issues.

"You didn't think it would be a simple duel, did you?"

He sent a stupefy, only missing because she threw herself belly first on the floor. She twisted, rolling around, dodging two more blue spells. Both were expelliarmus, she suspected.

The platform finally stopped, and though she now felt a little dizzy, she sprang to her feet.

The real battle began. Spells cracked from their wands, filling the room with the burnt smell of magic, an earthy scent similar to fire and mud. They twisted and ducked and turned, using the whole platform to move. Her obsessive duelling practice was paying off.

She'd been right. He only threw soft curses— stupefy, expelliarmus, incarcerous.

Still, they slammed hard against her shield and sizzled past her hair as she dodged and deflected. They came so hot and fast, she didn't have time to throw any offence. She'd only had time to survive the onslaught. With each curse, her Protego became weaker. Hermione couldn't keep up with the tempo much longer, and he knew it, giving her an infuriating patient smile.

"Confringo," she screamed, fed up with it. The spell missed him, but it stunned Titus enough that she had time to rebalance herself just as the platform began to move again.

"I'm going to assume Theo taught you that, because that's a *very* naughty spell for you to know." He flicked his wand. She wasn't fast enough to get out of the way as an incarcerous struck her, binding her arms down with ropes. Unlucky for him, it didn't bind her hands, and with a small flick of her wrist they unravelled and fell to the floor.

The circle stopped.

*Don't be predictable.*

She flipped her wand into her opposite hand and fired a Reducto. He blocked it, but the change of wand hand had surprised him.

"I should have known you'd be ambidextrous." He grinned, as if having fun.

Hermione huffed in frustration. It infuriated her that he barely looked exerted when she'd exhausted herself.

They continued that way for a while—Titus throwing half-hearted soft spells, and Hermione attacking with increasingly more dangerous spells, only interrupted by the moving circle, as they hopped around.

"Bombarda!" It exploded against his Protego.

That flirted with the boundary of level two and three curses.

Titus held his shield up for longer than normal. His eyes narrowed, as if wishing to pick through her brain.

"I'm going to assume Theo had a lapse in judgement and taught you that too."

She might be exhausted, but her rage still flamed within her, giving her another burst of energy. She gave a growl of frustration. It was time she tugged out the dirty tricks.

Hermione clutched her side, pretending to be in pain, bending a little to make it seem real.

"Ow."

Titus straightened, concern taking over.

"Are you okay—"

"Expelliarmus!"

His wand flew, but his response time was too fast.

"Accio wand!"

It zipped back into his hands, and he frowned, about to throw another spell, but she beat him to it.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" She curved it just right, and it connected with his torso. She flicked up, watching as his body levitated. And then she flicked down, and his body slammed hard into the ground. She thought she might have heard a bone crack.

"Fuck!" Titus rolled from his stomach to his back.

Hermione raised her wand, intending to incapacitate him, but he was quicker. An expelliarmus hit her, ripping her wand away. It flew out of bounds before she could accio it.

The room went silent and still.

They assumed she was done.

Snape stood.

"That was—"

"I am *not* disarmed," Hermione seethed without even looking at him. "I don't *need* a wand."

Titus got to his feet, brushing his knees. He clutched his side. In the brief respite, she focused on pooling the magic into her hands, raising her wrists. Wandless magic took time to build the more exhausted the person was. She urged it to hurry up before Titus regained his bite, but magic did what it wished.

"That was very Slytherin of you. I think you broke my ribs, Sprite." He tapped his side with his wand and hissed in pain as the bones reset.

"Good."

He snorted out a laugh.

"I enjoyed this. Truly, I did." His smile turned into something fond. "But I'd really like to bring you home."

Hermione was absolutely done. The magic buzzed in her hands.

"Oculus Lacrimam!"

It zipped from her, without all the unnecessarily complicated loops of the normal spell.

Titus managed to block it, but he lurched back, eyes wide, studying her with a tilted head.

"Where the fuck did you learn that one?"

*Years of studying magic right under your nose.* She wished to tell him that she knew several dark curses, some worse than the one she used.

He shook his head, as if still in shock and held up a blue Protego as he turned his attention to Snape.

"Was that a level two or a level three spell?"

The overseers were staring at her with varying expressions of disbelief. Snape cleared his throat.

"Level three," he said. "It's outdated, banned for cruelty, arguably dark, since it renders the victim blind, and the results are irreversible." He glanced at Titus with reproach. "I thought you said she only knew basic magic. That was... *wandless*."

"I have no idea where she learned that. Not from Theo and not from me, and our library is warded against her access to dark spells."

"After this, you should figure out the source. But—as of right now—she's lost the duel by using illegal curses."

"Illegal curses?" If she'd known it was illegal, she'd never have used it. "But he didn't win against me."

Titus snorted.

"I've been letting you play this whole time." The side of his mouth picked up, showing off his dimples. "You put up a decent fight, but I wasn't even trying."

"I'm not exiting this duel, except by force." Hermione kept her wrists raised in threat. "If you can't beat me, then you don't deserve me."

"She needs to—" Snape started, but Titus cut him off with a raised hand. He no longer looked at her with amusement.

"It's over," he said, voice firm.

"It's *over* when you incapacitate me."

"If you need me to dominate you, I will." Titus crouched back into his perfect stance.

"Incendio!" Two fireballs hovered over her hands, and then she threw them. He deflected one, slamming into a side wall. Another was redirected toward the ceiling.

The dance began, but it didn't last long. She fired three more fireballs, taking a lot of her energy, but Titus no longer wanted to play. He whipped his wand up and whipped down, faster than she thought possible. Her wandless magic wasn't enough, and her attempted protego cracked under the pressure.

A petrificus totalus hit her in the chest. Her body locked up and tipped over, just barely missing her nose cracking against the hard floor.

She seethed quietly as she waited for him to walk over, unable to move. He seemed to be taking his sweet time, before she saw his boots inches from her eyes.

He crouched down, brushing the curls off her face.

"It's over."

The petrifying spell loosened its frozen hold, and she gasped in a breath. Titus reached down to help her up, but Hermione scrambled away. She stood up and clenched her hands.

Whatever study said participating would make a witch more accepting of her situation was *wrong*. It only made her feel as if she'd just lost a long game of chess—the type that made a person flip the board and promise never to speak to the other player again. She knew the loss was really meant to show her the futility of fighting her circumstance, to show her how powerless she really was. Hermione frowned and hopped down from the circle, crossing her arms.

"Sprite—"

"Don't talk to me."

"Don't be a sore loser."

"If you come near me, I'll find the nearest sharp object and stab you in the heart."

"You downplayed her abilities," Dolohov muttered. He looked a little fascinated by her as if she was a newly discovered ocean creature. "You've been far too lenient with her. If it had been anyone else but you, I'd have taken her away and placed her in another wizard's care for that display."

"I had no idea she could do any of that either," Titus admitted.

"Perhaps you should consider dampening her magic with obsidian. Having wandless magic—or even a wand—is one thing, but knowing dangerous spells is quite another. It sets a bad precedent for the other muggleborns."

"She's not dangerous to me. I have her under control."

She almost cursed Titus again, just so he'd regret that statement, but it would be foolish to bait Titus in front of Dolohov outside the duel.

They continued to talk about her, but she refused to be a part of the conversation any more.

Hermione walked away to the edge of the room and sat down, waiting for the end and trying to wish away the discomfort in her stomach.

---

Hermione sat in the corner for thirty minutes until it was time for the last duel. She ignored everyone in the room, and no one bothered her either, probably sensing her temper was white hot.



She'd lost two Trials. The odds of her winning now were very low. It was a fool's dream, she knew. No witch had won. Still, it caused a deep resentment to fester in her, an infection taking root.

When Viktor and Titus climbed onto the platform, Hermione stood up, allowing herself to stretch sore muscles. Magic depleted energy in the same way as exercise, resulting in exhaustion. She saw now how Titus had only played with her. She'd given her all, while he only used just enough to deflect. Even his soft spells seemed half-hearted.

She'd rather have been beaten in a way that broke her.

Hermione walked over to the spot reserved for watching, protected by typical duelling barrier charms, standing beside Draco. She didn't look at him though, crossing her arms on her chest, paying attention to the impending fight.

"Titus is about to give us an advantage," he said without looking at her.

"Us?" Hermione asked. He said it like they were on the same side.

Again, he didn't make any sense. If Viktor won, the Trials were over. If Titus won, then all it would do would even the odds between Titus and Viktor, leaving Draco in the dust.

Hermione studied the two men as they stood on the raised platform, waiting for the duel to begin.

Even from here, she saw the perspiration begin to bead on Viktor's forehead from nerves. He clutched the wand tighter than he should, and his stance was just a little off-balance.

Titus hadn't gotten into his stance yet. He stood straight, holding his wand in his left hand with his head tilted to the side, watching his opponent. He barely blinked. She wondered what went on in his mind. Was he reviewing the litany of spells in his repertoire? Was he calculating weakness? Was he deciding on the best first moves? Duelling was much like chess in that way. Much of the strategy lay in surprise, leading the other player to believe something untrue.

The red countdown began. Each second flickered against her heart, pounding a rhythm along her body. When the three flashed, Titus finally crouched into position, looking like he was born to do this, without any tension in his legs. A confidence behind the flex of his knees, the tilt of his hips, only earned with mastery. A slight smirk lifted his lips now that he was in his element.

The countdown ended with sparks of blue and red. Spells slammed against each other before she could even take a breath, curving whips of magic, electrifying the air. The intensity reminded her of the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort—two titans clashing.

The familiar burnt smell drifted toward her.

As they danced around, using mostly nonverbal spells, switching from offence to defence, she understood now what Titus meant when he said he was playing with her.

He could have destroyed her if he'd wished, taken her hope and smashed it, let her watch the pieces shatter. But he'd let her have her duel, maybe to see what she could do. Maybe to try and give her a little dignity.

It didn't bring her any comfort. It only made her feel more powerless.

The platform moved, and Titus went with the motion, not even stopping while throwing a curse over his arm. A red incendio singed his skin, as it bypassed him, and another went over his head as he flung his torso backward.

"Good." Titus gave a nod of acknowledgement. "But not good enough."

Titus went on the offensive.

Hermione had never seen anything like it. The spells exited his wand like lightning without any hint of what they were.

Viktor proved successful at blocking most of them, but he seemed to be tiring. Hermione almost yelled out that he needed to stop leaning back, and that he kept straightening his legs too much. The off-balance stance would only exhaust him further, making him sloppy.

"You're overusing your left foot," Titus pointed out. She wasn't sure if he was intending to taunt or not, but he continued with the critique. "And your aim is off by a few centimetres each time. You don't compensate for the curve to your wand like I do."

Viktor attacked, seeming frustrated, using a spell that ended in a downward motion.

It was a mistake. What happened next flashed by in mere seconds. With his hand near his hip, Viktor was hit by a spell directly on his wound, causing him to crunch forward briefly from the sudden pain.

Without stopping, Titus gave an elegant twist of his body, ducking around Viktor's curse. While turning and rising, he sliced his wand up, like a man would a sword, and a bright red exited his wand, lighting up his face an unhealthy colour, features twisted into something she'd only seen with Zabini—an expression of wicked delight.

The red light hit Viktor as he straightened, followed by a spray of hot liquid that reached all the way to her. The cloud of red dotted the floor and painted the front of her body. A thunk sounded soon after. An object rolled toward her, making a horrendous noise.

The boundary spell protected from curse, but it didn't stop blood.

Hermione grabbed her lips with crimson-speckled hands, holding in her scream. It took her a minute to understand what she was seeing.

Viktor Krum's body still stood upright.

Without his head.

It stayed vertical for only a moment more, as if the nerves connecting everything didn't understand there was nothing left to control them. And then his body toppled backward, crumpling all at once, arms loose.

Hermione cried out in disbelief, understanding now that the squishy sound of something rolling toward her had been *Viktor's decapitated head*. It now rested near her in a perfect position to see his final look of surprise.

*It's not real.*

*It's not real.*

*It's not real.*

Hermione's mouth burned with acid as she tried to keep down her lunch. She put her hand out to steady herself, but there was nothing to hold onto. She made a few staggering steps toward Malfoy. He didn't seem surprised like her. Maybe a little disgusted, but not surprised, as if he knew Titus' endgame was to kill Viktor. It was why Draco dodged the duel with Titus, knowing he'd end up on the chopping block.

Or maybe he wouldn't have killed the Malfoy heir, because of Lucius, but disfigurement was a real possibility. She'd always known Titus was a killer, even suspected he might try to hurt the other contestants for her Trial.

But she'd never experienced this type of brutality— the severed head rolling toward her, the hot blood spraying against her body.

Viktor's body was still on the platform. A growing puddle of crimson streamed out the open tissue of his neck. It flowed off the side, creating a steady drip against the ground.

Hermione's vision tunnelled into small black dots. Malfoy caught her as she almost collapsed.

"Breathe, Granger," he said. "He shouldn't have done that with you here."

She grabbed Malfoy close, allowing herself to take a deep breath, pressing her frozen scream to his chest. He smelled like how Hopper did when he'd first given him back, and it calmed her.

"That's right— breathe. I'm here."

Hermione came to awareness as Titus' dragon hide boots slid toward her. She snapped her face up, viewing him properly. Maybe for the first time.

*The Butcher.*

"This is the last time I tell you to get your fucking hands off her."

"She grabbed onto me," Malfoy spat back. "After your stunt, she had a panic attack."

Titus came close enough to grab her arm with his gloved hand. She attempted to wriggle away, but he yanked hard, and she exited the safety of Malfoy's hold and crashed into Titus' chest.

"Are you okay?" Titus asked.

Hermione knew she must look pathetic. He'd seen enough gore that it must be nothing to him. But besides the filthy man, who'd deserved it, and her father, who she didn't quite remember, she'd never seen death. At least, not death like that—headless and gruesome. From where he held her, she could still see Viktor's body, seeping out a dark red puddle around the empty neck.

"W—why?" The contents of her stomach lurched again, and she groaned. "Y—You didn't need to—"

She couldn't finish. She remembered Viktor's soft smile as they danced, telling her that he planned to deserve her. He'd never be able to smile at anyone ever again. Even though she didn't know him that well, the loss gutted her.

*Herm-own-ninny.*

Titus searched her face. His own was devoid of emotion. Did he feel any guilt? Hermione doubted it.

"He made himself a threat by winning a Trial." Titus yanked her even closer. "And with a younger brother to take the role of heir, he was expendable." His lips curled in a grimace. "I'll do the same to any person who ever tries to take you from me." His eyes slid from Hermione and landed on Malfoy.

Draco made a noise at the back of his throat.

"Something funny?"

"Krum didn't understand the game you're playing like I do." Malfoy had the audacity to laugh again. "But do you want to know the best part? The *best part* is I understand your game." Draco stepped closer, but she couldn't concentrate beyond the feel of Titus' hand digging into her arm. "But you don't understand *mine*."

The shuffle of boots signalled Malfoy walking away.

"Ignore him," Titus' voice finally softened. He gathered her to his chest in a tight hug they'd given each other many times, her head connecting close to his steadily beating heart. She heard it thump as he ran his hands along her blood-speckled hair, and she tried not to shudder with her new memories. "You'll be safe at home soon."

The air smelled of death— a mixture of copper and something foul and wrong. She'd have new nightmares when this was over that even Hopper wouldn't be able to cure.

Hermione stayed frozen in his hold. She didn't know how to climb out of the shock, wishing she could occlude to make it easier.

"Dolohov," Titus' voice rumbled under her ear deep in his chest. "Send my condolences to the Krum family. It's a shame that a level two curse landed *just right* against the only vulnerable part of his charms and armour. A terrible accident, but these things happen. As a show of goodwill, I'll pay a substantial restitution, even though I'm not required."

There was a brief silence.

"A terrible accident," Dolohov agreed.

*They all owe me favours.*

She heard grunts of agreement from the other overseers as Titus led her out of the room.

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Graphic Depictions of Violence, Character Death. The Butcher finally being the Butcher.

# Chapter 24: Stealing the Sword

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Florence + The Machine– "King" ... This might as well be a theme song for this fic.

Thank you to MyPrivateInsanity. She worked really hard editing this chapter!

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

## Stealing the Sword

Hermione didn't remember going home. Her thoughts uprooted, causing a sharp headache. She couldn't stop thinking of Viktor's body hitting the floor, his head rolling toward her.

*The Butcher.*

She imagined body parts strewn across the streets of Manchester, concrete stained with blood. Did he loop the intestine along the streetlights? Did he place their heads in strategic positions for their loved ones to view?

Fifty-two men and women. It probably smelled terribly, reeking from prolonged decay.

"Sprite—"

He attempted to grab her hand in the foyer, but she sharply pulled away, twisted, and hit him hard across the cheek with a closed fist, exactly how Theo taught her. Her whole arm tingled with the force after.

Beyond flinching with the pain, he didn't react, except to grab both her shoulders and drag her toward him. Pink bloomed where she'd struck.

"What *the fuck* was that for?"

Was he a complete idiot?

"He didn't need to die!"

Titus narrowed his eyes. "Do you think I did that on a whim, because I felt like it?"

She shook in his hold.

"I certainly think you enjoyed it."

"I couldn't risk Krum winning another Trial. You're delusional if you think Malfoy wouldn't have done the same, given the chance. And if he hadn't, Lucius certainly would have."

Maybe that was true. Draco hadn't seemed surprised at the death. She shrugged off his hands and stepped away.

Hermione suddenly felt very tired. All of her anger deflated at once. She understood it was a by-product of shock, her mind attempting to make sense of what she'd seen.

Titus followed her as she stumbled to her room. Not having the energy for a shower, she used a quick scourgify on herself, then collapsed into bed, pulling the covers up and facing the wall. Crooks jumped up, as if knowing she needed him, curling against her chest and purring.

How could a person just be— gone?

Titus lingered in her doorway.

"I was impressed with your duelling." He hesitated, as if trying to figure out what to say. "I'm not going to interrogate you today, though I should—especially since you tried to bloody blind me, though maybe you didn't realise the severity of the spell. When this is all over, I'm going to need to know where you learned—"

"Theo will hate you even more after this. Viktor was his favourite."

The silence lay heavy in the room. She didn't ask if she could see Theo, though she wanted to desperately. She knew he'd be banned from the manor until after the Trials.

"Let me deal with Theo."

"Go away."

"Sprite— I'm sorry you had to see that. If I—" His voice sounded strained. "If it was allowed, I'd marry you in the old way without the need for the Trials."

"Maybe I *needed* to see that."

She still refused to look at him, eyes on the wall.

"I'm going to ask you a question, and I want a serious answer. Do you— do you think you could be happy with me?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Will it change anything for you?"

He didn't answer, but she could guess. He'd already made up his mind that he wouldn't let her go.

Could she be happy?

At one point, when her world had been smaller, she'd loved the manor. There was a chance that she could find contentment again.

And her other duties? Sleeping with Titus would be no hardship. If their shared time in bed were any indication, the physical aspect wouldn't be an issue.

But truly happy? That was harder to answer. Hermione was beginning to understand that love wasn't enough for happiness. Titus would keep her entertained as much as possible, paying for lessons or outings. But any real ambition would be stamped out. She'd never get to be anything besides *his*.

"Maybe."

He sighed.

"I know this is hard for you. After this is over, I plan to court you properly."

He waited for her reply, but she took her time. Every time she tried to speak, nothing came out.

Her acceptance of him was the only thing left in her control. She was afraid that if she gave up and let herself fall into his arms, she'd break with the landing. There would be nothing left of the old Hermione—the one who loved the life she'd had, with an endless future in front of her. She might as well be poured into the foundation of the manor, forever entombed.

"I'll leave you alone to think, but— if it means anything, I'll do anything in my power to give you a wonderful life. Full of love and joy and— I guess we can talk about this later. Get some sleep." One click of the Nott ring against the wood, and she heard him leave.

Titus had been her hero for so long. She'd thought of him like a dragon knight, swooping down to save her from the jaws of men like Lucius Malfoy. Even now, she didn't fear him like other people did. He'd never physically hurt her. But another side lurked inside him, one he'd kept well hidden from her. It peeked through when he'd tortured Blaise and killed Viktor. The red light had lit up his features, twisted in a deviant pleasure from winning, from killing.

Titus was a man bred for war— conceived for bloodied swords, battle cries, and the carrion crows that came after. His body had been sculpted from the stones of the ancient, cruel gods. The universe stamped its rare blessing on his brow and gave him the determination to see it through.

He'd have ruled the world no matter what situation he'd been born into, and he wanted her by his side as his queen.

But it wouldn't be as an equal. She knew this now. He wanted to clip her wings to keep her from flying away. He desired a constant companion— an outlet for all of the love he never gave anyone else.

He didn't recognize she'd outgrown her cage long ago, and the bars chafed against her skin.



She didn't want to spend her life on her knees in supplication to the god of war.

She wanted to hold her own sword.

And the only way she could see that happening was if she stood up, stole the sword, and became a god herself.

---

She'd skipped dinner the night before, so she woke up early to eat breakfast in the kitchens. Bitty fixed a full English breakfast, but she only ate the eggs and toast.

By the time she finished eating and got dressed in the same, now cleaned, fitted clothes, it was time to go.

Like the day before, Titus leaned against the fireplace, waiting for her.

"Your hair," he reminded, giving a soft smile.

"Oh." She'd been in such a hurry she'd forgotten. Titus watched as she braided it the best she could.

She blew a rogue curl from her face.

"Ready?" He asked.

No, she wanted to say, but instead she nodded her agreement.

---

The ministry was as cold as the day before.

"They really need to invest in better heating charms," she whispered as they entered.

Her good mood vanished. With a full night's sleep and a decent breakfast, she'd almost forgotten. But trauma never vanished. It lingered along the spine in a place she couldn't reach, making her believe it disappeared, and then, when she least expected it, the trauma crawled around and latched its claws into her heart and mind.

She could still hear the squelching sound of the rolling head. The thump of a corpse came next—a person that had smiled at her warmly not long before. The monster in her mind took control of her body. She shivered, hands trembling so badly she almost dropped her wand.

*Give my condolences to the Krum family.*

She focused on each expansion of her lungs.

When she finally came around, the black spots vanishing from her vision, she saw Draco had already entered and now stood near the seated overseers.

Her panic attack had attracted the attention of everyone in the room. Again, Dolohov studied her as he would inspect a cow, as if checking for good teeth and correct build. She withheld

the sneer she wanted to give him. Snape still seemed constipated. Goyle Sr. gave her one glance and then focused on something else. She thought she might have detected pity in it. Macnair leered at her much like Rosier had at Goyle's party, though he attempted to hide it better. Maybe because the threat of Titus stood right next to her, staring at her in concern. He'd been waiting for her to recover. One hand clenched his wand. The other grabbed the side of his trousers, as if to stop himself from reaching out to her.

"Nott," Macnair warned. "The Trial needs to begin soon."

Titus threw him a hostile look.

"We aren't starting until Hermione's ready." He put his concentration back on Hermione. "Are you okay, Sprite? You worry me when you're like that."

She hated that panic was her response to shocking things. Hated how her body forgot to breathe, rendering her vulnerable. She hated that Draco, Titus, and the overseers had witnessed it.

And really, it was Titus' fault she was panicking. He wasn't allowed to worry about her if he caused it.

"I'm fine," Hermione bit out.

She most definitely wasn't fine. Her chest still ached, but she stepped forward, walking toward the overseers.

*You can do this*, she chanted to herself.

She chanced a glance at Malfoy, giving herself a moment to study his confident stance. She wondered if he'd trained for the Trials. Did he practise duelling and flying? She bet he had. He was staring right back at her, mercury eyes flashing in the muted light, and it looked as if he was trying to communicate something to her, though she had no idea what that could be.

He mouthed something. She concentrated on his lips.

*Our date*, she thought he said.

"What challenge have you selected for the third Trial?" Snape asked Draco.

His stare never left Hermione. They roved over her face, and then he smirked, reminding her of his expression in the glade when he'd watched her cum on his hand— as if he'd won something.

"Riddles and puzzles."

---

Hermione watched as three box-like structures were assembled, situated a fair distance from each other. Each of them seemed the exact same inside— a classroom from what she could tell—though the rest of the contents of the room weren't visible once they enclosed them.

When the structures were finished being built by several ministry elves, the overseers called the contestants to the center.

Hermione wondered if Titus used any favours for this Trial. How expensive had Viktor's death been?

A Sphinx sat in front of the overseers. It had the head of a human, with a magnificent mane of white hair, but the regal body of a lion. It wasn't a real one, just an illusion, but she still somehow felt as though its eyes followed her.

"You will be given a riddle," Snape began, while standing back up to address them. "When the bell rings, you will then enter your rooms, and the door will lock behind you. The key to getting out will be hidden within. Solving the riddle will lead to the first clue, which will lead to the second, and so on. Whoever manages to first exit their respective room will win the third Trial. As with the other contests, you can back out and concede defeat at any time—"

Draco scoffed, and Snape narrowed his eyes on his godson for interrupting him, giving him a glare that must have terrified the students at Hogwarts.

"As I was saying," Snape said with a threatening drawl. "A contestant can concede defeat at any time. Magic is allowed within the confines of your individual rooms, though I will warn that *alohamora* will not work on the doors." He looked around for questions, but no one said a thing. If anything, both Titus and Draco gripped their wands with more determination. And Hermione did too. Unlike the other two challenges, she had a chance to win this one. She hated flying, so she naturally was terrible at it. She hadn't been trained enough in duelling, despite all of her practice, especially to win a real fight against Titus or Draco.

But this— when it came to her intelligence, she was their equal. Neither Titus nor Draco were stupid. Titus had to be intelligent for his line of work, and Draco had demonstrated his cleverness several times. Despite that, she felt confident that she was smart enough to go up against them.

But that also meant Draco chose something she might beat him at.

She didn't know what to do with that thought.

The hair along her arms stood up as the Sphinx uncurled its legs, tail swishing behind it.

When it opened its mouth, a voice boomed around the room.

"I am only one colour, but not one in size. Stuck at the bottom, yet I easily fly. Present in the sun, but not in the rain. Doing no harm, and feeling no pain. What am I?"

As soon as it finished speaking, it curled back down, sitting like the statues in Ancient Egypt. And then the illusion disintegrated back into the floor, its part in the Trial over.

Hermione chanced a glance at Titus. He was mumbling the words under his breath, eyes unfocused as if filtering through the library in his mind. Draco looked unbothered, as always, twirling his wand between his fingers. When their eyes caught, he grinned.

"It is now time for the contestants to find a room. Do not attempt to enter until the bell sounds," Snape reminded.

Hermione went over the riddle in her mind as she walked to the structures. She dismantled the Sphinx's words, pulling them apart, but her mind was racing too much to focus.

Draco and Titus allowed her to take the center structure, while they travelled further down to each end. She stared at the door handle as she stood in front of it, as if she could find the answer written along the metal.

The adrenaline spiked along her body. Much like magic, it felt like it concentrated its energy on her feet and her toes, readying her to spring forward.

*Think*, Hermione chanted, *think*. She imagined unrolling a scroll, showing a list of everything it could be, crossing the items off as she went. One line kept snagging her attention—present in the sun, but not in the rain.

It felt more literal than the others.

The bell rang, vibrating her bones with the loud noise.

She lunged, grabbing the door handle and yanking open the door, throwing herself inside with excitement. Before the door even closed behind her, she'd solved the riddle:

*A shadow.*

It appeared in the sun and disappeared in the rain. It was the same colour, but it did change size. Felt no pain. Did no harm. Everything fit. The more she thought about it, the more she felt confident in her deduction.

She'd solved the first clue, though she knew the riddle itself might not be the real problem to solve.

The door clicked behind her, locking her inside.

Hermione let herself take one giant, calming breath, pushing it out through her nose, before examining her space. The room was a giant puzzle. Each thing could be a clue, a red herring, or nothing. She doubted anything would be obvious.

As she'd thought, it resembled a normal classroom. One wall had a blackboard on it. Portraits sneered at her from the walls. She suspected the overseers could examine her through them. A small bookshelf with typical school books was on the wall opposite the blackboard. Several plants perched in various locations, including a potted Wiggentree. Instead of desks, there was a rectangular table. Resting on top was a quill and ink pot, a closed chess set, empty rolls of parchment. Some scattered sheets of parchment had writing on them half-finished, as if a student had stopped mid-sentence.

She read two of them. One was a poem. The other was a collection of spells that didn't make any sense.

Hermione sat in a chair to think. Allowing panic to take over wouldn't do her any good. She needed a clear head and mind.

*A shadow.*

She stood back up and calmly walked around the room. After the third lap, an idea came to her.

She'd been looking for shadows, but there weren't any big ones that she could see.... Which meant she needed to create one.

With a flick of her wrist, she turned off the light from above and extinguished the two candles. She gripped her wand and lifted it up.

"Lumos." The tip of her wand glowed bright, and she twisted it around the room, letting the objects cast shadows on the wall. She examined everything, tamping down her frustration when she found nothing.

Until the light hit the Wiggentree.

Hermione stopped in her tracks. In the end, riddles and puzzles were just pattern recognition. A person discovered—sometimes instinctively—when something either matched... or when something didn't match.

The tangled shadow left by the potted tree on the bare wall caught her attention.

If she'd never studied basic ancient runes, she'd have never found it. But her years of obsessive self-education finally paid off. In the center of the shadow, curled into the tree limbs and leaves, was the rune of Ansuz. It resembled a tilted F. The more she looked at it, the more unmistakable it seemed.

She'd found another clue.

Hermione called out "nox," then turned on the room light. She took a seat at the table, picked up quill and parchment, and wrote down everything she could remember about the rune.

It represented a divine message—good advice, communication, wisdom, inspiration. Its merkstave—or its reverse—represented manipulation and deceit.

She rolled the words around in her head until the meaning became clear.

The rune was pointing to either a book or a poem—possibly. There was a lesson written on the blackboard. It could be that, but it felt too obvious.

"A message".

She went to the bookshelf first. It held ten books of various titles. She flipped through each, but nothing stuck out.

Then she went to the table, which held the scattered papers— as if a student had gotten up in a hurry, leaving the work half done. She couldn't discern the subject of the class from what was written on the parchments. It almost overwhelmed her, but she didn't let the feeling get to her. The answer was here. She just needed to pay attention.

She pulled the scattered parchments into a single pile, and went through them one by one, putting aside anything that didn't catch her eye.

At the end, only one stayed on the desk. It was the list of spells she'd read at the beginning of the Trial.

Hermione pored over the schoolwork, focusing all her concentration on it. She forgot about the Trials. Forgot about time and space and the future. The only thing that mattered were the words before her, the ink, and the parchment.

*Confundo— causes confusion with the target*

*Homenum Revelio— reveals the presence of other humans in the surrounding area*

*Aguamenti— conjures a jet of clean, drinkable water from the tip of the caster's wand*

*Reparo—fixes broken items. Could also be used to counter the effects of Diffindo*

*Mucus ad Nauseum Tria—*

*Sonorous—*

It didn't make sense. Why was it incomplete? Was it trying to tell her something? And why these spells in particular? They didn't fit together in a typical lesson.

No, she doubted it would be another riddle. This would be a puzzle. Something about this was obvious. She was looking at it in a linear way, when she needed to look at it holistically.

It was when she stopped trying to decipher the meaning that she saw it.

*Of course.* She almost gasped with the relief of finding it.

It was an acrostic. She used to make them when she and Theo wanted to send each other secret messages as children, along with other versions of secret codes.

She sent a mental thank you to Theo as she extracted the first letter from each spell, building a complete word:

CHARMS

The next clue— it was apparent now that she'd seen it. That couldn't be a coincidence.

Hermione jumped out of her chair, heading over to the chalkboard toward the lesson she'd seen, placing the clue in an instant. She studied the board, knowing already that it held

a *charms* lesson— an easy, first-year explanation on the difference between static and dynamic charms. Much like the list of spells, it was only half written.

Hermione wondered if the lesson meant anything, but she quickly rejected that theory. She suspected whatever was written was meant to lead her somewhere else. Much like the shadow and the acrostic, she needed to think beyond the obvious.

Maybe it had nothing to do with the content of what was written at all and had everything to do with *the blackboard* itself. She examined it, running her fingers along the surface, feeling for any irregularities under the pads of her fingers. Finding nothing, she turned her attention to the other objects nearby. A small bucket of chalk was perched on a ledge. She picked up a piece, twisting the dusty object beneath her fingers.

Maybe this time, they wanted her to finish the lesson.

Indulging her instinct, she lifted her hand, placing the tip of the chalk against the board. Before the chalk could move, the front part of the board melted away, revealing a cubbyhole behind it... filled with keys. They overflowed with every size and shape. Dozens of them. Some of them were golden, some silver, some wooden.

Hermione withheld her squeal of excitement, understanding she was nearly at the end of the Trial. She brushed away her emotions, knowing even excitement might be distracting.

Turning back to her task, she dug out all the keys and set them on the table. There were thirty in all. She arranged them first by material, then decided to rearrange by size. After getting them in order, she walked over to the door and examined the lock on the handle. It seemed like it had a larger tip, so she went back and pushed aside the smallest ones, leaving her with three. She almost gathered them up in her hands to try them out one by one, but then she stopped herself and set them back down.

It was too easy. She doubted the challenge would be as simple as fitting a key to a lock.

Again, she needed to think beyond what seemed obvious. The makers of this Trial *wanted* her to waste time messing with keys in the door.

But what if this wasn't the last clue? She almost despaired, stuck in her thoughts, until inspiration struck.

A key did fit a lock. It just wasn't the door lock.

Hermione searched high and low, unable to find anything, until she came back to the table and sat down in a huff. When today's Trial had begun she'd had her anxiety under control, but it was starting to build the longer she stayed inside the room.

A part of her wondered if the others had already solved the puzzles. Were they watching through the portraits, amused at how long it was taking her?

*Stupid little doll.*

Even if she never got to choose, she needed to at least win one. And this was the only Trial where she felt she had a chance.

It took great effort, but she brushed off the pessimism wishing to cloud her mind.

When her thoughts cleared, she looked over and saw the closed chess box on the table.

*Our date*, Malfoy had tried to whisper.

She hesitated. What was the motive for Malfoy giving her a clue? He couldn't seriously want her to win. Not when it would take a win away from him. Maybe this was some elaborate trick to waste her time, ensuring his own victory.

*Us*, he'd said before Viktor and Titus' duel, as if they were a team.

It was foolish to consider.

But maybe...

She pulled it towards her. It wasn't grand like Malfoy's—just an average set one could easily buy in Diagon Alley. Initially, she'd overlooked it, because there wasn't any lock on it that she could see. But it was in the room for a reason, and it didn't fit in a typical classroom, so it must mean *something*. It rattled when she shook it, but she couldn't open it.

Hermione searched over the box like she had the blackboard. This time, with her complete concentration on it, she saw a little shimmer in the corner. She ran her finger over it and almost yelled out loud in shock, finding a tiny notch.

A keyhole. A very small one.

The key sorting was easier this time, as she chucked all but two out just by size alone. The first fit inside, but it didn't twist.

The second—a small click sounded as it smoothly turned. It was a glorious feeling as she set the box in front of her and lifted the lid. However, instead of chess pieces, inside were potion ingredients.

This time Hermione suspected it would be what it seemed. There could be no other use for potion ingredients, except for making a potion. The trick was *which* potion. It could be anything in the world.

She pulled out the ingredients and set them side by side on the table:

Bat Wings

Armadillo Bile

Wormwood

Armotentia



Acromantula venom

Aconite

Water

Newt Tails

Betony

Dandelion Root

Pond Slime

She spent several minutes staring at the glass vials, before one ingredient stood out to her—Armadillo Bile. It was odd to include, since it was a fairly rare potion ingredient and only had a few uses, two of them illegal, and the third—

In a moment of pure euphoria, she knew *exactly* what she was supposed to make.

She walked over to the bookshelf and grabbed the potions book, along with a small cauldron on the floor near it that she'd missed in her earlier inspection. After looking at the index, she flipped to the correct page, placing her finger on the title.

Armadillo Bile Mixture—it was the main ingredient that tipped her off, since Armadillo bile was rarely used in potions. Armotentia—which was often confused with love potion, Amortentia—was also its main ingredient, having few other uses. The finished concoction was highly corrosive, usually kept in heavy jars with locked lids. It shouldn't be played with by an amateur. If it got on the skin, she'd need to wash the affected area with a unicorn hair immediately, though she suspected she'd be unable to be hurt by it in the first place.

It corroded any substance.

For instance, door handles.

The room had never meant to be opened with a key at all. She'd been right that the keys were a misdirection.

Hermione didn't waste time and got started mixing it, discarding the ingredients that didn't matter. Everything was already in the correct measurements, chopped and sliced the correct way, so it didn't take that long to pour them in the proper order. After, she grabbed the cauldron spoon and gave a single clockwise turn, and then two counterclockwise. The spoon sizzled as she placed it on the table.

Luckily, it required only a single minute of brewing time, but the time transformed into forever. She glanced at the clock, watching the second hand tick along. Each tick felt like agony.

She didn't have anything to distract herself from anxiety or doubt, as panic threatened to overtake her.

Nearing the end of the wait, she picked it up and walked over to the door, whispering under her breath.

"One, zero—" It popped and sizzled in the small cauldron. The black substance resembled tar, showing her that it was both correctly mixed and had finished coagulating. Making sure not to get it on her skin, she threw it at the door. It sizzled on contact. A thick, choking smoke filled the room and her eyes watered as she covered her nose with her sleeve.

The potion worked at a fast rate. She shuddered to think of what it could do to a person as she watched the door handle melt down, and then the door.

After half the door had disintegrated, Hermione, unable to wait a second longer, decided to take a chance. Betting on the fact that the potion couldn't truly hurt her, she curved her body around the melting door, holding her breath so she didn't inhale the toxic smoke. She almost got stuck, but pushed through, and like she suspected, it didn't burn her like it would have under normal circumstances.

"Finished!" she shouted after stumbling out.

Hermione looked up to find the four overseers staring at her in absolute shock. Dolohov had his mouth open.

"There's no fucking way," Macnair said.

"Merlin," Goyle whispered.

Hermione glanced around, expecting to see Titus or Draco. But Draco's door had just started to sizzle, and Titus' was still fully closed.

She'd been so elated at solving the puzzle, at competing in a way that challenged her brain, that she'd almost forgotten the whole purpose of the day.

*She'd won a Trial.*

By seconds. Against all odds.

Being in the competition was meant to be a joke, a tradition none of them took seriously, a way to show muggleborns their place.

She wasn't actually supposed to win one.

Her feet shifted as she waited, absorbing their stares, both withering and shocked. It felt like hatred, an instant antagonism.

Draco made it out not long after she did. He coughed a few times, blond hair stained grey with soot. A minute later, dark smoke billowed out as Titus pushed open his door with a shove of his boot, the dragon hide impervious to most corrosive substances.

His wand was out, pointed at Draco. "I'm going to fucking kill you!"

The rest of the room was still silent, participants and overseers, as he stalked forward until he had his wand pressed to Draco's chest. Sweat from the heat of the melting doors beaded amongst the toxic soot staining Titus' forehead. Hermione assumed she looked similar.

"Kill me?" Draco let a single eyebrow raise. "What could I have done to deserve that?"

Titus grit his teeth, broad shoulders shaking from withholding his violence.

"You know what you did! There was twice the amount of Acromantula venom in my vial. If I'd put all of it in, the fumes would have poisoned me!"

"That's a serious accusation," Draco expression flattened besides a twitch of his lips. "Extra venom? It sounds like an honest mistake any elf could make. Not sure why you'd blame me. And, really, you're overreacting. Double the amount of venom wouldn't kill you, merely incapacitate you for a few days."

"Do you have any proof of your claims?" Snape drawled. His eyes were zipping back and forth between his godson and Titus.

"I will after I go through his memories."

Draco uncrossed his arms.

"Go ahead."

Titus looked like he might snap, but he lowered his wand, knowing just as well as she did that Draco was a master occlumens. If Bellatrix couldn't break through his walls, Titus couldn't either. He had no proof.

"You think you're so fucking clever, Malfoy, but one day the big dog you snap at will tear out your throat."

"I'm terrified," Draco drawled.

Titus looked like he was seconds away from making good on his threat.

Hermione wondered if this was Draco's plan— bait Titus until he snapped. But if Titus snapped, he'd murder him.

Instead of reacting further, Titus turned and walked toward Hermione. Once he got to her, he stood behind her and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. Everything had been wiped from his expression, showing that he was attempting to occlude, though it was going poorly. His fingers tightened and then released.

"I'm assuming that the girl's win will be void," Dolohov said.

"Void?" Hermione's soul filled with fire, exploding through her veins. She'd won that Trial! Even with Draco's underhanded move, she still would have won it by several minutes. She attempted to step toward Dolohov, but Titus tugged her back.

"Don't you dare," he whispered to her. "Dolohov is not as forgiving as I am."

He was right, though she loathed it. She curled her hands into fists, clenching her teeth, wishing her gaze could burn.

"What happens if the win is void?" Goyle Sr. asked. His confused expression reminded her of his son.

"I was second out," Draco spoke up. "If you void it, then I should be named the victor."

Titus slowly turned his head and glared at Draco. Whatever conclusion he came to, he didn't like.

"Hermione won this Trial," Titus said in a low voice. A firm statement that showed he didn't want to be argued with.

It seemed Titus would rather she won than Draco.

Macnair scowled as if tasting something bitter.

"A muggleborn winning her own Trial? It's absurd. An aberration of nature. Perhaps we should look into Titus and his leniency with the girl."

"Or, perhaps, I should look into *your* indiscretions," Titus threatened.

Whatever he meant by that statement was understood by Macnair. The older man straightened, features tight.

"Enough," Dolohov interjected with a wave of his hand before tempers could rise. He leaned back in his chair watching her. "It doesn't matter to me who wins or loses, as long as the result is the same. The girl can keep her win, though both contestants need to agree for it to hold." Dolohov kept his hard eyes on her. "So what do you say, Malfoy? Are you going to let the mudblood win a Trial?"

They waited for Draco's reply. She could almost see the wheels behind his eyes turning.

"I don't see why we're even debating it. She was first out the door. I'd rather win on my own merit."

Dolohov let out a snort of laughter.

"Your father will not be happy with that foolish decision. If you claim this one, then you'd have a chance to take your prize by tonight."

"My father *doesn't* make decisions for me."

Dolohov shook his head, and Snape glared at his godson.

A sudden thought occurred to her.

"And if I win tonight?" Hermione crossed her arms. "Will you suddenly decide that one is void too?"

Macnair snorted, as if the thought of her winning a second trial was the most ridiculous thing he'd heard all day. "I can't believe I'm hearing this. A win by a muggleborn would be pointless."

"She certainly is precocious," Dolohov said, with a nasty grin.

Titus brushed her neck with his thumb, as if to calm her.

"You won't win the next one, Sprite."

The condescending tone annoyed her. They had never thought she'd win this one either, but she'd proven them wrong. A hope rose in her, uncontrollable. She was unable to bottle it up.

"But if I do?" She asked again, unwilling to be dissuaded. "I want a guarantee that you'll uphold your word that I'd get to choose."

"Choose?" Macnair spat. "A muggleborn choosing her own wizard! Is this the depths to which we've lowered ourselves—"

"Quiet, Macnair," Dolohov cut off in a dangerous tone. "You're giving me a headache. As I've said before, if Nott and Malfoy are fine with it, then I care little who gets her in the end, as long as everything proceeds as normal. Do you understand? And if she wins the next one—well, maybe that's a sign that she's the one."

Silence. Titus tensed behind her.

Macnair still grimaced, but he gave a nod and sat back in his chair.

The one? What was he talking about?

"So does that mean my next win is safeguarded?" Hermione asked, slightly confused. She just wanted them all to say it. Written in stone. Unable to wiggle out.

"Again, that's up to your master and Malfoy," Dolohov said.

"It's fine with me," Draco said.

Hermione turned and looked at Titus, knowing he had the final verdict. His face was hard to read. He seemed to be thinking, doing calculations.

Titus' hand tightened again on her shoulder.

"We'll discuss this at home, Sprite"

Was he saying no? Her lungs tightened as she tried not to react to the betrayal.

"No," she demanded. "I need a guarantee right now. In front of everyone."

He leaned down, lips close to her ear.

"Do not disobey me here. I said *we'll discuss this at home.*"

Maybe he was right. She remembered Dolohov suggesting Titus dampen her magic. If she fought too hard in front of him, then he might change his mind about letting her compete.

Titus pushed a little on her shoulder so that she'd walk forward. Draco stood perfectly still as they passed him, hands behind his back, head to the side, staring at her with a wicked grin on his face.

"Good luck tonight, *Hermione.*" Her name rolled off his tongue like a poem.

Titus paused their walk.

"Instead of good luck, you should say goodbye. Because after the next Trial, I'll make sure you never see her again."

For the second time, something peeked out from behind Draco's mask. It was cold and hard as a knife, the sharp teeth of a predator. He kept Titus' stare without backing down.

"Good *luck*, Hermione," he said again, each word a declaration of war.

Titus didn't move, dissecting the sentence, as if weighing whether or not to take it seriously. After a second, he gave a derisive scoff and pushed on the back of Hermione's neck, signalling their time to leave.

## Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I did not come up with the riddle. It's a very common one that can be found on several websites dedicated to riddles. Some of you might have even heard it before. It doesn't seem to have any author that I could find, but it's not my brain child.

## Chapter 25: A Vow and a Promise

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion is at the bottom of the chapter, because the title is a bit of spoiler.

Reminder: this is Hermione pov, so if she doesn't know something, then you don't either. This includes anything to do with the "outside world". Some of y'all are wanting ch. 49 events to happen during ch. 28. Patience, young grasshopper lol.

BAMF of the day goes to MyPrivateInsanity for editing this beast of a chapter.

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

### A Vow and a Promise

Once again, they ate lunch in strained silence. Mid-way through the meal, Titus set his fork down and leaned back in his chair and watched her.

"I know you think I'm angry, but I'm proud of you." A smirk tilted up his lips. "The only muggleborn to ever win a Trial."

The compliment made Hermione pause. Despite trying not to react, it caused her body to turn traitor and flush with heat from the praise.

Though a compliment wasn't enough to distract her from the issue boiling between them.

"I want to know if you'll stand by your word."

"I never promised anything. You interpreted what you wished."

Hermione almost threw her fork at him. She closed her eyes, counting slowly to calm herself.

"Why are you denying me this?" The words cracked on her tongue.

"I'm not denying you," he answered. "I simply want something in return."

Hermione blew out a hard breath through her nose.

"Like what? Everything I have is already yours."

The light from the window hit him just right, blue eyes igniting like fire as he looked her over.

"I'm willing to give you what you want. All I'm asking is that you listen to my request without antagonism. Do you think you can do that?"

What she asked for was unprecedented. The fact he considered allowing her a choice soothed her anger to a manageable level.

"I'll listen."

It took a minute for him to respond, as if he was chewing on the words and didn't like the taste.

"If I win, I want a promise that you'll be mine."

Wasn't that the whole point of the Trials?

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Complete fidelity."

She remembered how angry he'd been when discovering she'd kissed Draco. But he was being a hypocrite. How many women had he'd paraded around over the years?

"And what about you? Am I supposed to watch as you get a mistress or wife, bringing home women once you've grown tired of me?"

He grinned, as if he liked the potential jealousy.

"I'm not planning to stray from your side. If you want a similar promise from me, I'll give it to you."

That was fair, she supposed, though the finality of it scared her.

"So if I win, I get a choice? And if you win, then you get my fidelity?" She asked to clarify, and he gave a nod of agreement. "And how can I trust that you'll hold up your end of the bargain? You haven't been very good at that lately."

"An unbreakable vow."

An unbreakable vow wasn't something to do on a whim. The consequences of not adhering to the specifics could result in death.

A vow for a vow. She should have known his Slytherin nature would want something in return, and it made her hesitate, because he was unlikely to propose this unless he held assurance he'd win. And if he did win, that meant no more sneaking off to kiss Draco. Her single outlet for love for her entire life would be him.

Did she want to risk it?

What was she sacrificing?

In the end, he'd backed her into a corner. For the illusion of choice, she'd need to place her heart in the center of a sacrificial altar for him to hold for eternity.



Still, it was her only option. The hope of winning was fragile, a flickering candle light threatened by wind, but it still burned. And while it burned, she'd do anything to give it oxygen and make it grow.

"Okay."

The tense lines of his shoulders loosened. He picked his fork back up and began to eat again, as if they hadn't just agreed to making a binding pact that could kill them.

If everything went according to his plan, then by morning, their dynamic would change forever. They'd have to consummate the bond tonight by ministry order. He didn't have a choice in that. She'd come to terms with it long ago, though she'd be lying if she said she wasn't nervous about having sex.

"Will it hurt?" She asked.

"Will what hurt?"

"Us— tonight. For me."

Titus studied her. It seemed like he didn't know quite what to say.

"It can," he said. "But it won't with me. You need to trust me when I say that I'd never hurt you."

The black galleon haunted her. Titus wanted her to trust him, but how could she? He'd lied to her before, and she sensed that he was keeping something from her again— to protect her.

He didn't trust her with the truth, hedging around his statements, telling her not to worry. But, in the past, that had only injured her.

Hermione only trusted herself.

She'd only trust herself from now on.

---

Snape arrived shortly after, to serve as the bonder. Without the Hogwarts Headmaster saying a single word, they all three stood before the floo, ready to make the vows.

Titus grabbed her face with both hands, tilting it up so she met his eyes, as if they were the only two people in the room. He stared at her for a long time, holding her as if she was delicate. His gloved fingers stroked along her cheekbones under her eyes.

"My clever, brave, stubborn Sprite. Do you know the things I'd do if you gave the slightest —" He paused, probably knowing this was doing nothing to settle her mind. "Give me your right hand."

She reached out, and they clasped hands. Snape walked forward, still silent and observing, placing his wand on their joined flesh.

"In the event that you win the final Trial, I promise that you'll get to choose which contestant wins you." Titus didn't look too happy giving her the concession.

"And my wins?" She reminded him.

"Neither of your wins will be voided."

"And you won't attempt to change my decision in any way?"

"I won't attempt to change your decision. Is that sufficient?"

Hermione reviewed the vow, trying to detect a loophole. But it was solid, so she gave him her nod of acceptance.

A ribbon of blue flame exited Snape's wand and wrapped around their wrists, tying them together. The heat settled under her skin, reminding her of the incantation used for Truth or Dare. They were similar in function, though an unbreakable vow was much more serious.

"Your turn," he said.

"I pro—I promise I will be faithful in body to you alone in the event that you win the Trials." Her voice faltered as she said the words, but Titus lost his pensive expression.

Snape almost started bonding the second vow.

"Wait," Titus interrupted. "I need to add my own promises." He gave her hand a squeeze, attempting to reassure her. "If I win, I vow that you'll be the only woman for my days and for my nights. My whole life will be devoted to you and our future children. You'll be mine, and I'll be yours. This will be a marriage in all but name."

When the second vow finished, the blue light embedded into her skin. Snape didn't waste time. He gave a gruff grunt of acknowledgement and disappeared into the floo.

Titus leaned down and gave Hermione a chaste kiss, firm enough to show a possessive edge. Hermione let herself lean into the kiss for a fraction of a moment, almost forgetting everything he'd done, before tugging back and placing her fingers over his lips.

"Not unless you win," she said. "I'm not yours until then."

---

The familiar biting cold of the ministry comforted her. It gave her another unpleasant sensation to focus on instead of her fear.

The overseers greeted Titus as they walked inside. Snape gave no indication of the serious vows he'd just witnessed.

They stood there while Hermione shifted from foot to foot, waiting to begin. After ten minutes of no Draco, she began to worry.

"Where's Malfoy?" She asked.

"If he doesn't arrive in five minutes, then he forfeits the Trials by default," Dolohov said.

An unpleasant sensation curled in her belly. Something didn't seem right.

Each minute lasted for eternity. What would happen if Draco never showed up? Would they allow her to still compete?

She studied Titus. His face was blank, but his wand hand kept flexing. It showed her more than a facial expression ever could.

Titus had done something to Draco. If he was out of the running, then the Trials would be over. There would be no point for her to compete, because the only other candidate to choose would be him. It's why he didn't care if he gave her the vow in the first place.

Titus glanced around. "I guess he's—"

The door to the room slammed open with a crack, and Draco walked inside with his wand drawn. Dirt was smeared across his face— and was that a twig in his hair? His trousers were ripped near his left knee, and his lip bled from a painful-looking gash.

Draco marched forward, wand trained on Titus with a violent curl of his lips, eyes darkened.

"You switched out my floo powder can for a portkey to Siberia! If I didn't carry an emergency portkey at all times, I'd be dead."

Titus didn't move or blink.

"And how could I get past Malfoy wards? How ridiculous. You have quite the imagination." A taunting smirk tilted up Titus' lips, only for a moment, as if he couldn't control it, but it was gone the next.

"I should crucio you."

"Threatening a mediator with unforgiveables? I know your father is Lucius Malfoy, but even he couldn't get you out of that. On second thought—" Titus opened his arms, embracing an attack. "Give me your best try. I dare you."

"Enough," Snape snarled. He looked at his godson. "Unless you have irrefutable proof that Titus Nott placed an illegal portkey on your mantel, you need to pocket your wand and ready yourself for the challenge. Might I remind you that any violence outside of the sanctioned times will disqualify you from the competition."

Draco was panting, but Snape's warning seemed to get through to him, and he slowly lowered his wand.

"You'll regret fucking with me," Draco spat, walking toward the overseers, torn trousers and all. She watched him as he slowed his breathing, as he wiped the expression from his face, his anger erasing as he deeply occluded.

By the time Dolohov cleared his throat, she couldn't read any emotion on him. Not on his face or in his body language.

Dolohov flicked his wand, and four giant landscapes appeared behind him.

"The last Trial is now set to begin," Dolohov motioned to the paintings. "As per tradition, the muggleborn will be allowed to choose one of the presented landscapes to host the final Trial. Each contains a different terrain with varying obstacles. They are redesigned with each new Trial, so that no competitor can acquire foreknowledge of what they contain.

"Within each of these arenas is a hidden green flag. The goal is to find the flag and bring it to a designated ending point, which will be at the highest point of every arena. The first person to bring the flag into the circle of completion will be named the winner. Magic will be allowed, but only level one spells can be used to subdue opposing players. Any questions?" Dolohov asked. No one answered him. "Very well. Come, muggleborn, and choose the terrain you'd prefer."

Hermione made her way to the line of artwork, each in frames as tall and wide as a man. The first held a winter landscape with icicles dripping from trees, weighing the branches down, snowflakes falling to the earth. The sky was grey and thick with hazy clouds, the land frozen and dormant.

The second was a desert, with sand dunes as large as hills. Resting in between were patches of dried earth, cracked from thirst. The bright sun seemed unrelenting. Scrubby brush and gnarled trees sat alongside cacti.

The third showed a jungle. Despite it being daytime, the tops of the trees blocked the sun, leaving the jungle floor dark. Plants and animals peeked from behind various foliage she couldn't identify.

The fourth was an ocean. Coral reefs stretched for miles in front of her. Brilliant fish darted in and out, and sharks circled in the distance.

She took her time with the decision, crossing off the winter landscape first. It looked miserable. She hated being cold, and the type of cold it presented made her bones hurt just looking at it. Shortly after, she dismissed the desert landscape. She wasn't familiar enough with the terrain. Thirst would probably be involved in the Trial, and she knew she wouldn't last through it.

That just left the choice between a jungle or underwater. Hermione already knew the bubble charm, which would help. Tabitha had put it on them as children when they wanted to explore the ponds on the Nott grounds, and she was a strong swimmer, though the circling sharks gave her pause.

Hermione's eyes landed once again on the jungle, judging the pros and cons. On one hand, there would be insects and animals and odd plants. She assumed many would be made carnivorous or dangerous in some manner. There would also be other tricks and traps along the way.

But due to Finch's obsession, she knew a lot about magical creatures and bugs. Most of her knowledge had been acquired against her will as Finch gave them hours-long lectures on unicorns or glow worms. Hermione smiled softly and touched the intricate wooden framing, thinking of her friend, thinking of her coven.

She'd done the impossible before with the help of her friends, gaining wands, learning magic, and she thought she might be able to do it again.

"This one." She traced over the thick canopy of trees, turning to look at everyone. Titus didn't seem too surprised at her choice. He gave her a slow nod, as if to tell her it was a wise one. Draco was still so deeply occluding she couldn't read what he thought.

"If that's your final choice, then you'll need to step through," Dolhov told her.

"Step through?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "Step into the painting. It will bring you to the location of the final and the other contestants will be placed at different sections of the arena. And then you will stay in that position until the bell sounds for you to begin."

Hermione pulled her finger back. Where she'd touched rippled as she pulled away, showing the surface to be almost liquid. The magic used to create these paintings was advanced—portkey magic. She suspected this was used as the final contest for all the Trials, though, like Dolohov suggested, they must switch around details to make it fair.

Hermione made sure her dragon hide boots were secure, hair still in her braid, wand at the ready. She was allowed nothing else, but she didn't need anything else. She had her mind, and she trusted that the most.

She didn't glance back as she gathered her courage and stepped into the landscape.

---

Hermione tumbled out into the jungle. The cloying humidity clung to her skin like a wet blanket. The framed painting hovered behind her only for a moment before it vanished.

The protective charms they'd placed on her in the morning still buzzed against her skin. Unlike Titus and Draco, she knew she wasn't in the same type of danger. Whatever they'd placed in the arena—whether that was a trap or an animal—wouldn't be able to harm her, though failing to overcome it would disqualify her.

Giant trees surrounded her, large vines hanging low, soil spongy and wet. On the nearest tree, mushrooms sprouted at the base, but she was not so foolish as to touch them, assuming any plant life or water was poisoned in some way. Only tendrils of sunlight pierced through the canopies above.

In the distance, through a break in the trees, was an odd hill with the top shaved off, creating a flat surface. It loomed high above the trees, and Hermione knew that was the final destination. After finding the flag, she'd need to climb it before entering the circle of completion.

She assumed it was all fake— an arena created for this specific purpose. They couldn't portkey to a real jungle. There might be a similar terrain in an allied country, but it still required special government permission. Though maybe it was a shared space for all of the countries combined. She didn't know much about how other countries conducted their Trials, or even if they all had them.

The terrain might be fake, but she bet the animals would be real— and deadly.

Hermione waited until the red number five appeared in the air before her. As the countdown began, Hermione readied her wand and went through her objectives.

Number one: stay out of harm's way.

Number two: find the flag before the others.

Number three: bring the flag to the circle of completion.

Sounded easy enough, though she knew it wouldn't be. Like Titus suggested, she needed to use every bit of magic and intelligence and fight if she wanted to win against wizards like Titus and Draco.

Hermione clutched her wand, the determination in her spirit growing as she watched the red numbers flash in front of her, ticking away to zero. The bell rang out, signalling her to start.

Hermione didn't act right away. Instead, she examined her environment again. Which way should she go? The sun was hard to see through the canopy of trees, and even if she could use it to determine her direction, it wouldn't help her. Was the flag to the south or the north? There wasn't a riddle to solve to help her with a first clue.

This was pure survival. It all boiled down to fast decisions, paired with knowledge of the environment. She doubted her strength in either, yet it was too early to quit.

This was the last chance for any sort of autonomy, and she wasn't about to let it slip by.

Hermione decided to hike in the direction of the tall hill.

---

As she walked along, the heat became suffocating. She lost track of time. It could have been minutes or hours. Time had no meaning in the jungle. Sweat made tiny rivers down her neck. She pushed aside some overgrown plants with a hard swat. It was almost no use. As soon as she pushed one away, another plant snagged in her hair, causing her to stop to detangle herself. She had a brief desire to cut off the bulk of her curls, bemoaning having so much of it. She doubted Titus was struggling with *this* particular problem.

Hermione tried not to think about the other contestants— of how close they were to victory. It only caused anxiety to thump through her.

A bug landed near her. She almost smacked it, but stopped herself just in time, recognising it.

A silverwing fly— a magical species that produced a powder in their thorax that caused sleepiness in both predators and prey. Similar to the trollcleg, they fed on blood, though not as aggressive. Only manticores and chimaera were immune to the powder, and the flies only released it when threatened.

She stared at it in wonder, knowing Finch would lose his mind, having never seen a live one before. They were fairly rare, making their homes deep in uninhabited regions.

The cloud of silverwing flies collectively buzzed, the edges of their wings lighting up, showing her their agitation. If they released their powder, she might as well give a shout to the overseers to give up, because she'd be disqualified after falling asleep.

To reduce their stress, she needed to smell more like her environment. Slowly, she squatted down and dipped her fingers into the soggy soil. Grabbing a wet chunk, she ran the dark, rich earth against her skin. The organic matter masked her scent, and the insects began to settle.

The act of coating her skin in dirt gave her *deja vu*, though she couldn't quite place it.

Hermione stared at the calmed insects as one of them landed gently on her arm. It started drinking her blood, but still she did not move. As softly as possible, she wrapped a hand around it in the way Finch showed her, creating an environment that imitated their homes. It wasn't long before the insect stilled, entering a temporary slumber. She placed a cushioning charm on it, so that it wouldn't be crushed, and shoved it in her pocket.

Hermione continued her hike, occasionally sweeping the dirt across her skin to renew the earthy smell. It worked to repel insects, but it did nothing for other animals. Ten minutes into her walk, a horde of small rabbit-like creatures popped out from a bush and almost gnawed off her legs. She vaulted onto the nearest branch, kicking at them.

Despite years of Finch shoving his special interests down her throat, she couldn't name the rodent.

Using a spell meant to repel spiders, she pushed them away with a swoop of her wand, but the little shites kept coming. Just before she climbed higher into the tree to escape their sharp teeth, she remembered something her professor told her a long time ago— almost all animals feared fire.

After sweeping the rodents away once again, she reached down and grabbed the driest branch she could find. It took three incendios for it to catch fire.

When one of the rodents leaped at her, she struck it with the burning branch, and it let out a high-pitched shriek. Normally, she hated causing any type of pain, especially to animals, but she made an exception for these rabid bastards.

It took three more burned rodents before they decided she wasn't a witch they wanted to mess with, and then they dissolved back into the jungle.

"That's right," Hermione swished the fire around. "Run you little arseholes."

She held the burning branch in her hand and continued her walk, feeling proud she'd thought her way out of two scrapes. The sky grew darker as she ambled along, though it was hard to tell. They had started in the afternoon, so she knew it must be inching toward evening. She dreaded the dark. Most predators were nocturnal. And though she did know a spell for night vision, it was hard to cast and didn't last very long.

Glowing eyes already stared at her from the bushes, salivating at the thought of burying their teeth into her flesh. The only thing that held them back was her fire.

All animals feared fire.

Except Manticores.

That was her first thought when the beast lumbered into view.

They stopped and stared at each other. The flames flickered in its eyes, while Hermione went as still as possible.

Hermione reviewed everything she knew about Manticores, and the results gave no comfort.

Manticores didn't belong in jungles, so the overseers must have thrown it inside the Trial just for fun. They originated in Persia, related to the Egyptian Sphinx. It had a human face with a lion's mane and the tail of a scorpion looming over it that could kill anyone instantly with its sting. They were sentient, but only in the way Acromantulas were sentient. Just enough to use their intelligence for their carnivorous urges. Just enough to croon while devouring their food.

One of the most dangerous creatures in the Wizarding World was within jumping distance from her.

"Hello," it sang, vowels elongated.

Hermione suspected she would vanish from the arena if she came in too close contact with the beast, but she wondered if the manticore would be able to sink its tail into her before the protection charm relocated her.

Either way, she had one option.

Hermione turned and ran, sprinting through the brush. She dropped the burning branch, and it sputtered out against the wet earth. She didn't have time to examine the foliage as she hurtled over it and dodged under tree limbs. An upraised root almost made her crash down, but she managed to right herself.

The manticore chased after her, tree limbs cracking under its giant paws as it gained on her. But as she ran, her brain began to work again.

Manticores may be immune to most curses and hexes— she'd never win with a fight— however, they could be redirected. Only one thing could manage that.

Hermione hurtled to a stop, pulling her wand out.



"Expecto Patronum!" Silvery wisps exited the tip of her wand, curling into the image of an otter— her patronus.

The manticore halted its pursuit, staring at her otter with interest in its too-human eyes. Much like other predatory magical creatures, they were drawn to the chase of prey.

Her otter bounded into the night, zigzagging through the trees. And, like she'd hoped, the Manticore twisted toward it, forgetting about Hermione as she forced herself to be completely still. It gave an odd roar, reminding her too much of a woman's scream, and bounded away into the night.

When it was gone, Hermione lit up the end of her wand as she bent over, gasping for breath, wondering how much more of this she could take. The adrenaline caught up to her, reminding her body and mind that a *Manticore* had just been nipping at her heels.

Hermione lifted the end of her shirt and wiped the sweat off her forehead. She'd need to continue, but—

"That spell wasn't from Theo either."

Hermione froze as Titus exited the tree line, walking into her view. He wore a grin, looking exerted too. Had he been following her? Had he run along with the Manticore?

Would he have saved her from it, or would he have let her be transported back to the overseers? She already knew the answer to the last one. Titus was prepared to win at all costs.

She didn't trust him, so she pulled her wand up and pointed it at him.

"Going to curse me?" He held out his arms to show he didn't hold his wand. But she'd seen him draw a wand in a flash, so she didn't let her guard down as he stalked forward.

"I just might."

He gave a snort.

"When this is all over, I'm going to need to know *exactly* what you know and where you learned it."

Hermione straightened her arm.

"Don't come any closer."

He rolled his eyes.

"I'm not going to disqualify you," he said. "Not yet, at least. You just lured away a Manticore with a fucking Patronus!" He shook his head with a smile, as if he still couldn't believe it.

"That's quite advanced, and despite being angry that you've clearly been sneaking behind my back, I find myself — intrigued."

"Well, you can be *intrigued* from a distance."

"We really are perfect for each other." He kept walking closer and closer, disregarding the wand at his chest.

She'd never win a duel against him. That had been made abundantly clear in the second Trial. It didn't matter how much she practised.

The only tool she held was surprise.

One of her hands dropped and touched her pocket. Gently, she slid her hand inside, cupping the insect in her hand. It buzzed under her fingers.

His eyes looked dark with the low light.

"I'm not supposed to touch you during the Trials, but seeing you repel that mantichore—I really want to kiss—"

She threw the silverwing fly at his nose. The powder exploded from its thorax into his surprised face. She covered her mouth and ran before she could breathe in any of it.

She didn't know if it was putting him to sleep, like she intended, or not, but she wasn't sticking around to find out.

Hermione ran through the jungle as if the Manticore was still chasing her. She stumbled once, tumbling to the ground, but she scrambled back up, knowing the fall tore a hole in her trousers. A trickle of blood from a cut ran down her shin into her sock.

She ran until she couldn't take another step, lungs seizing in her chest. When she finally stopped, she glanced around. The jungle was darker than before, and she felt watched. The hair along her arms raised, sensing the predators in her midst. It was an ancient instinct. She didn't need to see them to know they were there.

Hermione found another branch and lit the end with an incendio like she did the last time, hoping the instinctual fear of fire would scare off all but the worst.

Now over her furious run, she stepped softly, digging her feet under the leaves, attempting to not make a sound, following the ever-present hilltop in the distance.

She had no way to track time, but it felt about ten minutes later when she stumbled on the first rocks. Moss and vines grew over them, giving the impression of ancient ruins, crumbling with eternity. But it was an illusion like everything else.

Still, it was the first thing different from the surrounding jungle, so it felt like a clue. She followed the crumbling stones, until they got bigger and bigger, ending at a small pyramid structure.

Should she enter it? Instinct told her no, but the logical side of her brain knew it probably contained the flag. It wouldn't be an easy in and out, grab and go situation either. No, they'd made it dangerous and complicated.

Hermione walked to the pyramid, examining it. It reached maybe three times higher than she stood, with only one opening. She circled the structure, finding nothing else.

Going back to the entrance, she stared at it a moment, letting herself take a few deep breaths, knowing she'd need all the courage in her body to proceed.

Keeping her branch raised, the fire flickered along the stones as she walked inside. But she stopped immediately. The entrance opened to a wide room. The walls were bare, but the floor was made of stone squares, each containing a symbol. It didn't look like any script, modern or ancient, that she'd ever seen. Which meant it was a code.

But a code for what?

She glanced back down to the floor. Looking over each tile carefully, she discovered there were only three symbols used, all resembling old cave paintings, maybe runes if she squinted. The first looked like a stick figure of a man with an odd-shaped head. The next showed what she assumed was a horse, though it had twists to it. The third might have been a cave lion with two long teeth. All three of them appeared over and over throughout the room.

She suspected the floor triggered some sort of deadly trap and the symbols meant something. She just needed to figure out what. Walking back outside, she picked up a medium-sized stone.

After entering again, she threw it at the stone with the stick man. A line of fire blasted through the stone, slamming upward against the ceiling. It only lasted a few seconds before the fire vanished, leaving a gaping hole where the stone once had been.

So stick man was a no.

Hermione gulped, imagining what would have happened to her if she'd just waltzed inside without care.

Determined now, and a little wary, she went outside to get a second stone and a third, trying to find one heavy enough to trip the trap but light enough she could throw it further. She tugged them inside and set them on the room's edge.

After eyeing the possibilities, she tossed the next stone at the one that resembled a horse. It did nothing. She waited, but everything stayed the same.

Just to eliminate all the possibilities, she aimed at the third symbol— the cave lion— and flung her last stone. The square crumbled on impact, along with three surrounding stones. They splashed into the water below, followed by the furious snap of a creature's jaws. She didn't wish to know what the sound belonged to.

Horses were safe.

An odd contentment went through her at solving the puzzle. She wondered if curse breaking would be similar. It sounded like an exciting career, something she'd excel at.

But this was possibly the closest she'd ever get.

Hermione shook her head, banishing the depressing thoughts. She needed to stay focused, get the flag, and continue to the final point on the hill.

Hermione gathered and threw a second rock at a horse to confirm her theory before risking her neck. It stayed solid.

Taking a deep breath, she summoned her courage and leapt to the closest horse. It held steady, though she wobbled. No part of her could touch any other stone. One would crumble the stones around her, dropping her to unknown depths, the other would turn her into a rotisserie chicken.

Hermione took a moment to map out her path. It was like a maze, where some of the stones led to dead ends. After carefully pinpointing the perfect route, Hermione began her hops and leaps. If she didn't think too hard about it, it was fun. As if she was a little kid again, with Theo, playing a lava game. Except the lava was real, and the wrong move had consequences.

The last symbol loomed, and she hesitated, wondering what she was about to fling herself into. She couldn't see from this angle. Its opening had a staircase that led to a darkened hall. Whatever lay beyond would be a mystery.

It didn't matter. She couldn't turn back now. She had to see this through. At the very least, she needed to cross the finish line, even if she didn't win.

Hermione jumped. It wasn't quite far enough, and the stone gave way from under her. She grabbed the edge of the stairs, tugging herself up just enough while the square fell into the water. She swore she heard the distant sound of snapping jaws again. Did they have crocodiles down there? Hermione was a curious person, but not that curious. Instead, she heaved herself the rest of the way onto the stairs and panted against the unforgiving edges.

After catching her breath, she pushed up, getting to her feet. Behind her, the stones rearranged themselves, magically reforming as if they'd never been disturbed in a thousand years.

It meant the others could have gotten here first. Or they could be right behind her. She wondered if Titus counteracted the sleeping powder in time. He probably did. As an auror, he'd been trained to get out of all kinds of things. She refused to underestimate him.

And Draco? She hadn't seen him since entering the Trial, but he was probably lurking around somewhere.

An urgency built in her. She was wasting her time overthinking. Hermione looked at the dark hall, holding her wand aloft with a quick *lumos* and walked inside.

---

The hall twisted and turned. She went as slow as a snail, watching for traps. Lines crisscrossed on the floor, and by instinct, she stepped over them, not willing to waste the time to figure out what they did.

The hall abruptly dead ended with a solid stone wall. She reared back a little, thinking she'd made a mistake. Had there been a different way? If there had been, she hadn't seen it.

The same strange symbols were etched in the stone. Without rocks, she didn't have a means to test, assuming touch would either let her through or try to kill her.

After a thorough search she found a miniscule horse in the corner—the only one on the wall. It could be another trap, but she had to try. Knowing this might be the end of her adventure, she took a chance and pressed the tip of her pinky against the symbol.

The whole stone door vanished. One moment it was there, the next it was gone. She didn't have time to celebrate her victory, because she noticed the edges were already starting to reform. She flung herself through just as it returned to a solid wall.

Once again, Hermione panted against the ground, breathing in dust. She must be filthy: covered in dirt, leaves in her hair, along with sweat and possibly dried blood.

Stifling a groan, she paused, looking up to find Malfoy standing in front of a raised stone structure, doing a complicated set of wand movements. A glowing orb of lumos hovered above him to light his path. A waterfall crashed behind him, disappearing underground, probably feeding the reservoir of water under the stone maze.

If it wasn't for the roar of the waterfall, he would have heard her, but the noise covered her entrance. She considered dispatching him right away, but decided against it, curious at what he tried to do.

Knowing she needed to hold the advantage of surprise, Hermione slowly made her way to a side wall hidden in darkness, lumos extinguished. For a moment, Draco's eyes roved through the dark as if sensing someone close, someone watching. She held her breath, stilling her movements, and then she relaxed as he went back to his task.

Malfoy seemed a little frustrated, as he tested out different spells. He tried several wand movements with little luck. Finally, his expression cleared, replaced by excitement.

A swish. A flick. Another swish, and a green flag appeared—a rectangular scrap of cloth half the size of a child. Draco reached out and then hesitated. He waited a few seconds, as if taking calculations, and then he grabbed the flag.

Hermione watched his face light up in exultation.

It was a shame she'd have to cut his joy short.

"Incarcerous!"

Thick ropes wrapped around Draco's middle, knocking him to the ground. He scowled furiously, but when she stepped out of the shadows, the scowl died, replaced by a contemplative look that slowly grew into something almost mischievous.

"Granger," he said. "If you'd have told me constraints were your kink, we could have experimented with them long ago."

Despite the darkness, she knew her cheeks burned at the suggestion. He always managed to get under her skin.

Hermione walked toward him, silent. When she got close enough, she bent down and took the green flag from between his fingers.

"You were so focused on getting this." She dangled the flag in front of him. "But you should have kept an eye out for other predators."

Draco's white teeth flashed in the dark, lit only by the lumos still dangling in the air above them.

"As I've implied, you can tie me up any time you'd like."

Hermione paused, eyeing him. Draco seemed too calm to be losing. He didn't seem upset at all that she'd jumped from the shadows and stolen his prize. She hesitated, searching for the trick. Knowing him, he probably had one up his sleeve.

She placed the tip of her wand under his chin.

"What's your game?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

"Clearly."

He scoffed. "For the brightest witch I've ever met, you can be very obtuse. Even Nott's figured me out. Why do you think he forced the vow on you?"

She went completely still. The hair on the back of her neck lifted.

"How do you know about the vow?"

It looked like he might not answer her, so she pressed her wand harder until his grin turned to a grimace.

"I have my *ears* everywhere. A person can't succeed without the correct motivation and strategy. Take you for instance— what would Hermione Granger do for a *choice*?"

Draco had spied on them. She wondered how as she took her wand away, unsure how to react to the information, having trouble recognizing if it was insidious or not. In the end, it didn't matter.

"Well, it's been invigorating to beat you, but I have a Trial to win." Hermione stood up, not even bothering to brush away the dirt from her knees.

"Remember what I promised you."

He meant his pretty words at Madam Malkins— his promise to let her do what she desired without saying no, giving her whatever she wanted without restrictions, including postponing

getting pregnant.

Hermione shook her head, refusing to look at him.

"The thing is, Malfoy, I don't trust you, and I don't believe you."

"Granger—" he started to say, but she began to walk out, blocking out his pleas for conversation.

She'd think about his revelations later. Right now, all Hermione could concentrate on was the flag and the area on top of the hill. Tying the flag securely around her waist, she refocused her mind and crawled back through the tunnels as his voice faded away. And then she leaped along the tiles. This time she didn't miss any, clearing the last one and landing at the entrance to the pyramid.

---

Only two more incidents happened as she walked toward the circle of completion.

As she pulled on a vine, it tumbled down. She'd realised it was a snake just in time to avoid the fangs and immobilise it.

The second event happened because she'd kept her eyes on the treeline when she should have paid attention to her feet. One second she was walking, and the next she was sinking into a puddle of mud. To her good fortune, she'd already had a hand on a sturdy branch, attempting to swat it away, so she grabbed on, hoping it didn't break, as she scrambled out.

It took her a whole minute to bring down her panic attack before she could continue.

Once she got to the big hill, it proved a fairly difficult climb. She jumped from rock to rock, finding her own path, cursing it as she went, giving it threats as if it was sentient.

As she climbed, she kept hearing something below her. When she moved, it did too. But when she stopped, it stopped as well. With her hands occupied, and her wand clenched between her teeth, she had to rely on her senses. She scanned the area, but finding nothing, she continued on her way, convinced it was just in her head.

When she got to the top, she lay groaning in the dirt, wishing she could quit, muscles burning. While she wasn't out of shape, exercise wasn't what she liked to do in her free time.

Forcing herself up, she studied the area. The top of the hill was flat, but it had thick vegetation like the jungle ground. A small clearing was a short run from her. A dome of hazy blue light shimmered. All she had to do was cross it with the flag on her, and she'd be the winner.

A burst of adrenaline went through her. All that remained in her existence was the flag and the clearing.

Hermione didn't waste any time, trudging through the vegetation. She untangled a vine in her way, being careful that it wasn't a snake.

She could see it clearly now—the circle of completion.

Hermione almost gave a loud whoop in joyful excitement. She marched along, as the thought of victory made the magic zip around her veins.

But the wariness that she'd been followed couldn't be shaken.

"Homenum Revelio," she said.

A magical signature lit up to her right, but it was too late. A lasso of magic wrapped around her waist, trapping her wrists, reeling her toward her opponent. She stumbled with each tug.

Titus stepped out from behind the tree, pulling on his magic lasso until she was in his firm grasp. He wrenched the wand from her hand and in a quick movement, he undid the lasso, but bound her wrists in front of her, leaving her helpless.

She struggled against him, but it was no use. He untied the flag and jerked it away.

She should have expected something like this. After all, what was the use of fighting through the pyramid, when all he had to do was wait for the hapless person to wander to the finish line after doing all the work for him?

Without saying anything, he tugged her along with him, forcing her to walk, though she attempted to dig her feet into the soil.

"No!" she yelled. "Let me go!" But he didn't heed her cries. Instead, he grabbed her struggling body up and flung her over his shoulders, his strong arms pinning her legs to his chest. She hit his back with her fists in her rage. "You wanker! I'll hate you forever!"

He gave a snort.

"Obstinate to the end," he said. "But your threat doesn't scare me. I don't think you have it in you to hate me forever."

He walked until his feet edged the circle. The blue haze gave off a faint buzz of magic.

"That trick with the sleeping powder was clever. Almost brought me down, except the powder can be washed away with water. A quick aguamenti, and I was as good as new." He shook his head in amusement. "This will be an exciting story we can tell our kids one day. Their mummy was so fierce, but their father wasn't about to let her slip away. The chase was fun, I admit. I'm glad you proved a challenge."

"Don't take this from me," she begged.

He sighed.

"I'm willing to be a patient man for you and that includes weathering your temporary anger."

He gave a little pat to the back of her struggling thighs and then stepped across the line.



It took a moment for reality to hit her.

He won.

*Titus won.*

She'd been so close, and he'd stolen it from her.

But had she expected anything else?

"No," she groaned. It came out like a pathetic whimper.

He let her slide down his body until her feet touched the dark soil, knowing there was nothing more to stop. The fight left her.

"No," she said again, feeling like she was going into shock.

The rest of her life flashed in front of her. Walking the manor halls day after day, staring at the ballerina twirling, reading the same books, seeing the same people. It felt like she was being crushed. A glass cage sliding closer with each breath, without access to a real education or anything she'd want for her life. She'd occasionally be brought out for ice cream and books, and then she'd be brought back to rot. A piece of furniture, a possession, ready to be used.

She supposed the nights might be fun for a time, curled in Titus' sheets. But it would only lead to bloody sheets as she laboured, pushing a slick body out of her, as it squealed for her attention.

Would she like the nights then? Or would she dread them for what it would cost? Would she think it worth the brief pleasure?

He vanished the binds on her wrists. And then he grabbed the sides of her face, tilting it up, giving her a look of concern.

She stepped back away from him, and he tried to reach for her.

"Don't touch me," she warned. He dropped his hand with a frustrated look.

"I knew the loss would be hard for you to accept," he said this as if to remind himself.

"You're a wild spirit. It's something I love about you, but it can also hurt you. Don't you see that? I just want to keep you safe, and that includes being kept safe from yourself."

Her eyes went to the treeline, wondering if she could run. She stepped outside the circle of completion, outside the bubble of magic. She had no true plan. Her instinct was just to escape.

Titus eyed her warily, probably sensing her thoughts. "There's nowhere else to go. They'll just transport us back. In fact—" he glanced down at the green flag in confusion. "We should have already vanished." He looked toward the sky with his brow furrowed.

Slowly, he lowered his head and glowered.

"Something's wrong. Come back here, Sprite. It's not—"

Two things happened at once.

The flag in Titus' hand changed from a bright green fabric to an emerald leaf.

She only had a few moments to realise the flag in Titus' grasp had been *transfigured* before Draco Malfoy appeared next to her, dispelling a complicated disillusionment charm.

Draco grabbed her shoulders, turned her toward him, and wrapped a thick cloth around her throat like a scarf.

"You look lovely in green," he said.

With one hard push to her shoulders, she tumbled backward, stumbling over the blue haze of magic. She grasped the cloth as it threatened to flutter away. Finally straightening, she glanced around. Malfoy wore a satisfied grin.

"Fuck," Titus said.

Hermione looked down at her feet.

She'd crossed into the circle of completion with the flag— *the real one*—wrapped around her neck.

Hermione glanced up in shock just long enough to see Titus' horrified expression, mouth open as if a shout died in his mouth.

"I won," she whispered.

And then all three of them vanished with a pop.

---

They reappeared in front of the overseers, who wore the same expression as Titus— complete disbelief.

Hermione took a moment to orient herself, still clutching the green flag.

Her thoughts ran wild. Draco had waited for her to step out of the circle. He'd most likely gotten to the flag first in the pyramid, and then he'd waited for her to arrive and given her a transfigured leaf. The whole interaction with him tied up must have been a ruse. Then he must have escaped his bounds in time to climb up the hill behind her. The noise she'd heard had been him. And after using the revealing spell, she'd been captured too fast to look for other people, thinking it had been just Titus.

"There's no way we can let this stand," Macnair said. "There's no precedent for this. A muggleborn, winning her own Trials? It's absurd. We might as well allow the lot of them to riot. It can be argued that Malfoy truly—"

"The win will stand," Titus said, voice hard. She knew he hated every word out of his mouth. "I promised her I wouldn't void it."

It had to stand or else he'd die. Titus had made an unbreakable vow, confident that she'd lose. By his expression, he wouldn't have done that if he'd thought she'd had any chance of succeeding.

The overseers looked at each other in confusion, but they all seemed to accept it. Macnair wore a frown, as if the situation were distasteful, but Dolohov only looked at her with interest.

"So the golden mudblood gets to choose her fate," Dolohov drawled. "A Malfoy or a Nott. Well, let's get on with it then. I don't have all day. Who do you choose?"

"Right now?" Hermione asked, still feeling whiplashed. Her brain hadn't quite caught up to the situation.

"Right now."

How could she make that sort of choice immediately? Her whole future was on the line.

Both Draco and Titus stared at her as if wanting her attention, but she kept her gaze locked on the ground beside Snape's shoe.

The decision seemed so simple before. Just moments ago, she'd been about to riot over the idea of being brought back to Nott manor. She was mad at Titus, but did she really want to say goodbye? He was all she'd ever known. The facts of Titus were simple: he loved her, he'd never hurt her, and he'd always try to make her happy. There would be no leap of faith with him. No rough transition. It would be back to her old routine—a comfortable life in luxury. The only change would be sleeping with Titus, which—if she was honest with herself—would be no great hardship.

In contrast, Malfoy was a wild card. She didn't know all his motives. He couldn't have lied during their game in the glade, so he believed they were fated, and he was attracted to her. But they didn't love each other. They barely knew each other. Would he resent her eventually? Would he place the same chains on her that Titus did and ignore all the promises he'd made? Would she be miserable, trapped for life with a cruel man?

She placed her hands on her ears, as if to quiet the storm in her mind.

Why did Draco shove her across the line? Why didn't he take the win for himself? If he had, they would have created one last Trial—a tie breaker.

*I know your game Nott, but you don't know mine.*

*What would Hermione Granger do for a choice?*

He'd chosen riddles and puzzles for his Trial, knowing full well she might beat him at it.

Her mind paused, as all of the pieces came together. His cryptic statements to Titus. The way he didn't struggle against his bonds in the Pyramid.

Her eyes widened.

*Draco wanted her to win.*

Not only that, but he'd *schemed* for her to win.

He'd gifted her the thing she'd wanted the most in the world—a choice—fully knowing she might not pick him in the end.

Her heart lurched, and something odd filtered through her. More substantial than attraction. Heavier than lust.

Hermione's eyes snapped up, viewing Titus. Despite all of her recent anger, she loved him—fiercely. She wished to thank him for his kindness to her. He didn't have to educate her or let her have friends. He could have beaten her. He could have hurt her in numerous ways. Instead, he paid for tutors and started a muggleborn school, just so she wouldn't be bored. He attempted to keep her happy and protected.

Tabitha was right; she was his bird. Leaving him would wound him in irreparable ways.

But if she ever wanted to experience the exhilarating freedom of flying, she'd need to find the courage to jump from the nest and fall, with only a slim hope the wind would buffet under her outstretched wings

Titus' eyes widened, as if he understood her thoughts. He reached a hand out toward her.

"Sprite," he said, voice raw. "Don't—"

"I choose Draco Malfoy."

## Chapter End Notes

Song Suggestion: Charlotte Lawrence— "Joke's on You"

## Chapter 26: A Second Choice

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Malia J– “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (Nirvana cover)

Artwork: Calibre10 has given me two lovely fanarts of Draco/Hermione for the Trials. I posted them at the bottom of chapter 22. And Frau Blucher has given me two awesome fanarts. The first is of the Nott brothers on the bottom of chapter 15. The other is Hermione/Titus located on chapter 21. Go check them out!

One of my awesome readers created a Spotify playlist:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7gVcbfox96JtJ42jGeto92?si=x2a4kvlQSDOfU8Tr90LjQ>

Thank you for all of your lovely reviews. I’m spoiled with so many! I read all of them for motivation, but I didn’t have time to respond to them all like I wanted.

Thank you MyPrivateInsanity for editing, as always!

### A Second Choice

Titus lowered his hand. His face was frozen, mouth opening in shock.

For a single moment, as she watched Titus comprehend her decision, his expression falling into devastation, she regretted her choice.

But then his wand sprang into his hand.

"Diffindo." A red light headed straight for Draco, almost too fast to see.

With a quick flick of his wand, Malfoy deflected it, and the spell dissipated against the wall.

"Stop," Hermione cried.

"Don't intervene." Titus shoved her out of the way with a nonverbal slash of his wand, her body almost crashing into the overseers. "Fight me," Titus demanded, facing Draco. "Or are you still a fucking *coward*?"

Draco, wearing his own vicious sneer, crouched into an elegant defensive stance. Unlike Viktor, it didn't hold flaws that she could see—showing he'd been extensively trained.

"Coward?" Draco gave a sharp laugh. "You're confusing strategy with avoidance. How does it feel knowing you're *predictable*?"

"Confrigo!" The spell curved from Titus' wand. Again, Draco dodged it with a quick twist, though it might have burned a few hairs.

"Like I said, fucking predictable."

Something slid shut in Titus' expression, like putting on a mask.

"Cruc—"

A giant blue shield wall erupted between the two duelling men before it could go further.

"Enough, Titus!" Snape stood up from his seat. "You might tempt *magic*."

The warning was clear: Titus had made an unbreakable vow to not interfere with her choice. If he struck a blow against Malfoy, he might break it.

Draco gave a sly smirk.

"Backing out so soon? I thought you wanted to fight me for her. It looks like *you* might be the coward. Go on, do it... crucio me."

Hermione had never seen Titus like this – completely out of control. He took a step forward and straightened his arm– as if willing to risk death just to injure Draco. Growling in frustration, he seemed to consider what Snape said, and pocketed his wand with trembling fingers.

His glare turned to Hermione. She had an intense desire to soothe him. *I just wanted the chance for more.*

"How could you do this to me, Sprite?" His voice cracked on her name. Raw pain clung to him like chains on his neck, and then he turned his back on her.

The castigation sliced into Hermione, haunting her as she watched Titus escape the room as if a dementor was chasing him. When he disappeared through the door, she shivered, feeling sick to her stomach at seeing him in agony. It hurt her to hurt him. She'd been confident in her choice at first, but with each second that passed, doubt gnawed at her. She'd taken a leap into open air, hoping for a soft landing, but she was still descending, unable to see the ground.

His departure left only the overseers and Draco in the room. She didn't have long to feel awkward, because a group of three women walked through the side door opposite the entrance in white dresses, gliding toward her.

"Follow us," the tallest one said when she got close. She had a long red braid that reached her waist. "It's time we prepare you for the night."

Hermione went rigid at the command, stepping backward. Instinctive warning bells went off in her mind.

A black galleon warmed her palm.

Had it been physical or emotional pain? Had it just been the transition? Or had it been something more sinister? Why did Titus arrive so late after Katie's Trials, if they'd ended in the afternoon?

"No," Hermione said. "I'm not going."

The women glanced at each other, and then they turned to the overseers for help. Dolohov smirked, though it held a warning edge, sharp as a knife.

"Go with the women, Precious," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

The hair on the back of her neck prickled in the same way it had while she'd walked through the jungle, knowing unseen dangers lurked in the shadows.

"What does she need to prepare for?" Draco still had his wand out, pointed toward the floor. "Doesn't she just come home with me?"

All the men laughed, except Snape.

"I see your father hasn't filled you in on the details." Dolohov shook his head, seeming amused. "Of course you'll get to bring her home. Such an eager pup. The cunt you earned might be more than you can handle, I can tell. She'll need a man's touch to keep her in line."

"If I ever hear you talk about her cunt in my presence—"

"A Malfoy through and through, I see. So possessive already, though you haven't even fucked her yet. The girl is just being prepared for you. Do you want her to smell like the jungle?"

The men laughed again.

Hermione shifted on her feet, ashamed to be talked about like that in front of other people. One of the girls—wearing a pink headband with a matching bow—reached out and touched the top of her hand in a way no one could see. Hermione jumped with the contact, but relaxed once she realised it was just meant to soothe her anxiety.

If possible, Draco looked more annoyed. And then his face smoothed—occluding again.

"Just let her go, Draco," Snape said. "You'll have her all to yourself soon enough."

Hermione wished to protest more, sensing something off—something wrong. Something even Draco didn't know.

Why didn't Lucius tell his son what to expect? It didn't feel right.

Unless he thought Draco might fight it.

Hermione wanted to resist, like her instincts urged, but it would be against the four overseers. Dangerous wizards. Some of them Mediators. What chance did she stand against them? And where could she go? They'd only capture her and dampen her magic.

"Come with us." The girl with the bow placed a gentle arm around her shoulders and began leading her out, and Hermione let her. As she walked alongside them, Draco met her eyes one more time.

His occlusion dropped for an instant as she disappeared behind the door, exposing his disquiet.

---

The women led her through the corridors and into a lift. As they travelled, she discovered their names. The youngest—the one with a bow— introduced herself as Lavender Brown. She gave constant little smiles, though they didn't reach her eyes. The woman with the long braid was named Marietta Edgecomb, eyes hard, moving like a robot. Hermione wasn't sure if the woman just didn't like her, or if she reserved her scowl for everyone.

The last woman— Veronica— had pretty dark hair and talked constantly from the moment they exited the Trial room until they reached their destination. Hermione's brain felt like mush, so she just stared at her mouth as she spoke, confused at the words. Nothing stuck enough to answer back, but it didn't seem to bother the woman.

The one-sided conversation served to distract Hermione as they led her inside a small room, hosting a plush chair, a mirror, and an ancient clawfoot tub in the center of the room. Various hair and other grooming potions were lined up on a nearby shelf, showing many of the same ones she used at home.

When the three girls beckoned her forward to the steaming tub, she still did nothing but walk closer in a dumb stupor.

The door closed, and Marietta tugged on the bottom of her shirt, trying to lift it off her. But Hermione's brain finally turned on, and she swatted the woman's hand, scrambling to the opposite side of the room.

She reached for her wand, but couldn't find it. Her horror deepened when she realised Titus still had it, tucked in his pocket after he'd taken it from her in the Trial. In all the confusion, she'd forgotten to take it back.

But that didn't leave her defenceless. She raised her wrists in threat.

"Stay away from me."

Marietta sneered at her.

"If you don't comply, we'll need to—"

"Let me talk to her," Lavender interrupted, raising both her hands as if to show herself as not a threat.

"I'll give you a minute to convince her before I do it my way. We don't have much time to spare."

Lavender turned her attention to Hermione.



"We're just giving you a bath."

"Nothing else?"

"Well, after the bath, we'll do your hair and nails. Just basic grooming." Lavender swallowed, her pretty blue eyes wide. "I—I knew Theo," she said. "He was my friend in school. Talked about you all the time. I've always wanted to meet you."

"You knew Theo?"

"I used to call him a puppy, always following after Harry, looking so cute and pathetic."

Hermione laughed despite her nerves. Her brother did resemble a lost puppy in need of a home.

Lavender stepped closer, and Hermione lowered her wrists, knowing deep down her fight was pointless.

As she helped her take off her clothes, Lavender talked about Theo and how he once exploded a potion and turned half the class green. And then she told her a story about a younger girl named Luna who wore radish earrings. It helped soothe her anxiety, but Hermione was still a little hesitant to get naked in front of multiple strangers.

"We'll need to take your necklace off," Lavender said. "It will be sent to your new home, along with your clothes."

"My necklace?" Hermione asked in confusion, and then her fingers went up and touched her throat. Since receiving the universe, she'd taken to wearing it all the time, to the point she frequently forgot she had it on.

Gently, she unclasped the jewellery. Her neck felt odd and bare as it slid off. Marietta plucked the universe from her hands and placed it on top of her folded Trial clothes. Now naked, Hermione slipped inside the steaming tub and allowed the girls to work.

---

They washed, brushed, plucked, and scrubbed every part of her— parts she'd never bothered to deal with before. After numbing her skin with a potion, they proceeded to eliminate the hair on her body, starting from her legs then her arms and underarms. The smell of burning hair made her gag. Nothing seemed to bother the women though, as if they'd done this all the time, so her shame vanished, slowly replaced with boredom.

When they got to the hair of her private areas, Hermione stopped them, wiggling away before they could begin, afraid the burning might hurt a little despite the numbing cream.

"What's the point?"

"Most men like it bare," Veronica said as if she thought Hermione was a little slow. For a reason Hermione didn't understand, a shiver went through her.

"But I always thought—well, isn't it normal for a woman to have hair there? I thought it meant I was an adult."

The more she thought about it, the more she didn't like it—especially since it had been ordered. She'd eliminated the hair on her legs and underarms before, liking how smooth her skin felt after, but she didn't realise having hair on her private areas was something to be ashamed of. Draco never made any mention of it, and neither did Titus. In fact, he'd stared at her cunt as if it looked delicious as is.

The women looked at each other in that odd way, as if they didn't know what to do.

Marietta's mouth thinned, but Lavender cut in before she could threaten anything.

"Of course, but it's just standard practice." She gave a pointed stare at the other women, conveying something lost to Hermione. "We don't have to use a permanent spell.

"Whatever makes you happy," Marietta said through clenched teeth.

"Okay," Hermione said, unsure why she felt so resistant to the order. Though she still wasn't comfortable, she sat back and let them work again. As she anticipated, it did hurt, despite the numbing cream.

The exchange left her feeling disturbed in a way she couldn't explain.

---

Her curls took the longest. Marietta cursed under her breath, tugging on her scalp, attempting to get them to obey. Lavender gave a soft smile while painting her nails a blood red, as if her unwieldy hair amused her.

It took a full four hours for them to finish. An elf entered mid-way through with a tray topped with lemon water and a light dinner of chicken and vegetables.

Hermione found the whole thing tedious, though she could admit the results turned out magnificent. Her curls, once frizzy, now spiralled down her shoulders and back in smooth ringlets. Her skin glowed in the soft light. Pretty nails and soft makeup. Just a hint of colour to her cheeks and a few charms to cover her blemishes.

Hermione didn't understand why they wasted the time. Did Malfoy care that much?

Her nerves bunched in her stomach, thinking about the impending task. She'd always known the first night required sex, but she wondered where he planned for them to do it. Would he bring her to his bed? Would he touch her first? Would he know how to make it less painful? Would it hurt after the first time?

She had so many questions, but she knew no one would answer them. So all she could do was stew in a slow simmering anxiety.

---

As much as the pampering annoyed her, when they finally finished, Hermione wished to extend it. Ending this part meant the next part needed to begin. After completing their tasks,

they wrapped her in a robe with nothing under it, not even knickers or slippers.

"Is that all?" Hermione asked.

Lavender clutched her hand and gave a squeeze. Her eyes looked tired, as if this event had sucked the strength from her. It only made Hermione more nervous.

"Just one more thing. A simple spell, nothing more. Lavender brought out her wand and slipped it through the folds of her robes and tapped her stomach. A light glowed dark red right above her robes. Lavender's shoulders sagged down, as if in relief.

"What was that?"

"It checks for—" She bit her lip hard enough it had to hurt. "There's nothing left to do now. We've been told to bring you to the waiting room."

Hermione assumed the spell checked for virginity. She'd read it was a standard practice before the old marriages.

"The waiting room?"

That didn't seem too bad.

They led her through the ministry corridors. Occasionally, she'd see another witch or wizard. They'd stop and stare as she passed, but she ignored them. After a few floors up, the lift opened, and they entered a room on the first right.

Stark white walls greeted her with nothing in the room besides two ornate goblets on a small wooden table filled with what she thought might be wine. She went inside and the women didn't follow her, besides Lavender. The other two began walking away.

"Can I give you a hug?" Lavender asked.

Hermione wasn't big on physical touch, but she needed the comfort too. "Sure."

Lavender wrapped her arms around her waist and slipped a cold vial in her hand. Hermione dared not look down, and Lavender no longer smiled.

"In case you need it," she whispered.

"What is it?"

"Poison."

A chill went up her spine. She tried to pull back, but Lavender kept her held tight.

"Why would I—"

"It's untraceable and will look like a heart attack."

"Why would you give me such a thing?"

"I'm under a vow of silence," she said. "But I— Theo once stopped Blaise from— Let's just say I owe him a favour. He loves you so much, and this is the kindest option I can think of."

Hermione wished to pepper her with questions. What could be so bad that she'd choose death?

"I can't kill myself."

Lavender sucked in a breath as if close to saying the wrong thing. "Whatever they've told you—Merlin, I'm trying to save you from—"

Her lips snapped shut.

"From Malfoy?"

Hermione's stomach dropped and twisted at the thought.

"I can't say."

She tried to give the vial back in a way the others couldn't see, but Lavender shoved her hand aside.

"Lav, we need to go," Veronica called from down the corridor.

"I was just saying goodbye." Lavender pressed her wand to her robe, and a pocket formed. "Keep it. You might need it one day." Heeding the warning, Hermione slipped the poison in the make-shift pocket, and Lavender whispered a cushioning spell to prevent accidental breakage, sewing it up again.

Why would she need poison? Would Draco be cruel tonight? Would the first time hurt that bad?

Squeezing her hand one more time, Lavender exited without a backward glance, closing the door behind her, leaving Hermione alone.

Malfoy believed they were fated, but he might have been playing a long game of lies and manipulation. What did Lavender know that she didn't?

There wasn't anything else she could do but wait.

---

Hermione stood there, fidgeting, attempting to control her nerves. When the door opened, she almost jumped in surprise, wound tight as a harp string. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as Malfoy walked in, wearing a similar robe to her. She could see the outline of his body through the thin fabric, and she assumed he could see hers.

He stopped, staring at her. His face seemed paler than normal, almost sickly. Haunted.

"Are you all right?" She asked eventually.

He grimaced and looked away.

"That's what I should ask you."

Lavender's warnings kept bouncing through her mind. The silence became oppressive as he stood there.

"How did you spy on me?"

She needed to solve the mystery. It had been bothering her for hours.

The side of his lip jumped. Only for a second, and then it vanished.

"Theo, of course. He placed an invention of the Weasel twins under the dining table and somewhere on the mantle. I've been able to hear every conversation. I didn't even have to bribe him into it this time."

Theo! She didn't know if she wanted to kiss her brother's cheeks or punch him in the nose. Maybe she'd do both the next time she saw him.

"But he never visited again after the dinner."

"He did, but since the manor wards obey Theo too, he told them not to notify Titus. He slipped in and out without either of you noticing."

It was a stupid risk on Theo's part. Titus' anger would rival a dragon's if he ever discovered the duplicity, especially given the outcome of the Trial.

They stood there for another minute of uncomfortable silence. He hid something. She saw it in the way he refused to look at her.

"Do you know what happens next?" she asked.

The worst part about the day was the uncertainty. But Katie went through it and so did many other muggleborns. It couldn't be that bad, right? Despite being angry at her, Titus wouldn't let anything truly harmful happen to her.

Would he?

The doubt opened a hole in her soul, a dark miasmic thing.

"Yes, my father has informed me of the process. We're supposed to be getting to know each other right now... though the way you came on my fingers at Malkin's seems a sufficient introduction." He attempted a joke, but his voice sounded harsh again, grating the words to shreds.

"Why did they give us wine?" Hermione hadn't touched the drinks yet.

"To relax us."

"Are you nervous?"

He hesitated, seeming to go paler, if that was possible.

"I'm not allowed to be."

"It's okay if you are." She swallowed hard, wondering why her mouth felt so dry. "Is this—your first time too?"

"Yes."

An unknown fear loosened in her chest and disintegrated. Just like in the glade, they'd figure it out together. There was nothing to compare it to. They'd probably be bad at it, but that was okay.

"Have you done anything else besides what you've done with me?"

His eyes flicked back to her, and he sneered at her in a cruel way. "Do you really want to know that? Because I sure as fuck don't want to know if you've done anything else." He clenched his jaw and shook his head. "It doesn't matter, I suppose. I never lied. You were always my first, but there were a few girls I've kissed. One I touched. I—thought it would be the same, but it wasn't."

She shouldn't have asked him about his history. Not when she'd let Titus touch her. He was right. What they decided to do with their bodies in the past didn't mean anything for the present. And she didn't bother examining the jealousy broiling inside her.

Hermione made up her mind and walked to the table, trying to display her courage. She picked up a golden goblet, assuming they were both the same, but Malfoy stopped her.

"The jewelled one's yours." She placed the goblet down with a click.

"What's the difference?"

"Mine's whisky. I remembered you thought it tasted like poison. The wine for you is a rare elvish vintage. I'm told it tastes like summer berries. You can barely taste the alcohol."

"Thanks for your consideration."

She picked up her goblet, inlaid with rubies. Before she could drink it, he walked forward, distracting her with how close he stood, and picked up his own.

The cologne he used lingered in the air, and it smelled divine. She took a moment to appreciate his physique, visible through the thin fabric of his robes. If she got rid of her nerves, the future nights of pleasure excited her. She imagined running her tongue down the muscles in his stomach, imagined them tightening under her as she went lower and let her mouth do what she'd seen in the study. Could she break his occlusion with a simple lick?

Malfoy watched her intently as she brought the goblet to her lips.

"Don't drink it!" Before she could sip, he smacked the jewelled goblet out of her hands. It clattered on the floor beside her, crimson droplets spraying across her white dress and on the pristine wall, reminding her of Viktor's blood. In shock, she wiped a few beads of wine from her face with her sleeve.

"Why the *fuck* did you do that?"

Malfoy tipped back his goblet, drinking the entire contents, then flung it to the side in obvious anger, no longer attempting to occlude.

"I didn't know!" He kicked the table away. It struck the wall, and the noise of it crashing to the floor echoed around the barren room. Hermione placed a hand to her sternum and stepped away from the violence. "You have to believe that I didn't know. My father didn't tell me until today. I—I'd heard rumours, but nothing was ever confirmed, so I thought it was just gossip. It's the old guard of Death Eaters, the originals. They are the ones behind it. They don't let anyone inside their circle unless they've gone through it themselves or if they're the head of an old family."

"What didn't you know?" Her voice sounded much calmer than she felt.

He glanced up, eyes wild and red as if rubbed raw.

"My father didn't tell me because he knew I wouldn't have allowed you to be—" He closed his eyes for a second, controlling his breathing. "We're stuck now. There's nothing either of us can do without them taking you from me. Do you understand? I didn't want it to be like this."

"You're scaring me." Hermione took another step back. He watched her move away with a grimace. "What's going to happen?"

"They want me to take your virginity."

"Of course," Hermione said, highly confused.

"You don't understand." He ran a hand through his hair, tousling the top. "They will all be there—watching."

Horror bloomed in her soul, opening its poisonous petals.

*We've both seen witches fight and scream on the ritual night. It's not pleasant. Do you want that for Hermione?*

The veil of secrecy ripped away in one violent tug.

"All of them?"

"There's a ritual we need to complete. They're trying to break the curse, and virgin blood is a powerful method. So far it hasn't worked— but they've been excited for yours. They think you might be the key. Which means there's no way to get out of this. They'll hunt us both down if we try to run."

Hermione clutched at her stomach. It all made sense now. The cryptic remarks. Lucius, Rosier— Titus. She almost whimpered when she thought of the last name, because he must have known the whole time. How could he not? He'd been on the board of overseers several times for various Trials.

And he'd been late coming home after Katie's—

Did he—did he watch her friend—

Her vision began to get fuzzy, and she stumbled, reaching out to hold on to the wall, but Malfoy caught her instead.

"Fuck, Granger, don't panic. Please, don't panic. I don't know if I can get through it if you're like this. And if I can't get through it, you'll be given to Titus. Right now that's *exactly* what he fucking wants."

Titus would have taken her virginity in front of an audience— in front of all the lecherous old men that he'd tried to shield her from. In front of Rosier and his gross smile. He'd have done it while Dolohov stared at her like a Manticore, while Macnair hissed "mudblood."

She'd never felt so betrayed. Not even when he'd started the Trials.

"What was in the wine?" She asked, still gasping. Draco let her go and backed away. He looked guilty and pale.

"A potion," he admitted. "Titus gave it to my father and demanded I give it to you. He said it would make your time... easier."

"Easier! How the fuck could anything make that easier?"

He rubbed his palm into his forehead as if his head ached. "It's a rare potion that makes you seem lucid for the moment, but it scrambles your memories for twenty-four hours without the permanent damage to your brain that Obliviate can cause. I'm not even sure how Titus found the ingredients. It can take a year to brew."

For an entire year, the man she'd loved her whole life— the man she'd counted on to protect her— that same man had planned to take her virginity in front of an audience. And then he'd have stolen her memories, so she would never have known what had happened. The worst part was that he probably thought it *would* be protecting her. She could imagine him trying to justify it now.

"Do the other girls get drugged as well?"

"Most of them. They used to not bother, but it caused... problems. Now they need to be aware enough to participate, but many are given calming draughts spiked with a mild aphrodisiac. They remember it though."

A black galleon.



She felt ill, but now that the shock had worn off, she stood up straight. Her horror turned into a low, simmering fury. She understood now that she was a sacrifice on the altar of their infertility. In a way, she'd always known that. She'd deluded herself into thinking it was some sort of honour, but there was nothing sacred about what they asked of her tonight. A part of her wished to have sex with Draco now and spite them all, but she knew the consequence of that would be dire.

"Why didn't you let me drink it?" She still couldn't understand his motivation.

Draco's face hardened into sharp lines. He curled both hands into fists at his side.

"Is it that hard to believe that I wouldn't want to rape you, drugged out of your mind, in front of an audience! Bloody fuck, Granger— I thought I could bring you home. Maybe under one of the consummation spells, like they did for old marriages, and of course, I knew I was expected to use the Malfoy binding spells. If I had known—" He reached out, and she stepped backward. He dropped his hand, looking in pain, as if her retreat wounded him. "If I had known ahead of time, I'd have figured a way out of it."

She'd been betrayed so much, she didn't know if she could trust him.

"What do we do now?"

Draco accio'd her goblet and syphoned up the wine, cleaning it of impurities. Even the droplets from her dress lifted off the fabric and returned to the goblet.

"Now, you have another choice." He extended the wine. "We can't get out of the ritual, but you can decide if you want to be drugged or not. I'd—I'd understand it if you wanted to forget."

Hermione hesitated, staring at the liquid. Did she want to forget? The thought of being intimate in front of a group of men made her want to vomit.

But it was her first time. Something she'd never get back. And Hermione wasn't one to like to be out of control of her thoughts. She needed her wits, and if she had to glare at Titus the whole time just to see his guilt, she would.

"No." She pushed it away.

Draco's throat moved, but he levitated the side table and set it right in front of her. Like an offering, he placed the goblet on the center of the table.

"Titus will know you didn't take it, and the others will know I didn't give you a calming draught, so you can't fight or panic. At all. You must obey me, or he'll have the right to finish for me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered, wondering if she could uphold it. Her panic attacks tended to take over her body, rob her of autonomy.

He ran a hand through his hair, and two red spots erupted on his face, flushing.

"None of this is what I'd choose for our first time. I had planned to... prepare you to make it comfortable." He flushed even brighter. "But I'm not going to subject you to that in front of the men." His voice had a hard note to it, a determination. "So you can't fight it, Granger, even if it hurts. I'll try to help you through it, but you'll need to trust me."

How could he ever help her through it?

"Will it hurt?"

"I know a lubrication spell that should make it easier. But the ritual— my father said the pain can be severe, depending on the witch's magic. There will be a script applied to your stomach, and it burns your skin."

"Won't a pain potion help?"

"Not with this ritual. There's nothing I can do."

"I see." She wondered how she sounded so calm when on the inside she was screaming.

Despite having trouble trusting him, he did give her another choice, even at risk to himself. That was far more than anything anyone else had given her.

And they were stealing his first time too. She wondered how many fantasies he'd had of them, only for it to be ruined.

"It's okay, Malfoy," she said. "We'll get through this together."

He grimaced in disgust.

"Save that sentiment for later. I'm fully expecting you to hate me for the rest of our lives after this. We only have until midnight, so make your choice wisely. I think—I think I need some time alone."

He turned and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

---

Hermione stared at the crimson liquid for a long time, weighing the pros and cons. The full goblet was still sitting on the table when Draco returned.

She suspected Malfoy wanted her to drink it, forget everything and not remember his role in the night. But despite that, he'd left the choice to her— the second choice he'd given her in a single day. Her emotions were too confusing to sort through, so she bottled them up and shoved them to a dark recess of her mind where she could review them later.

In contrast to earlier, when his rage poured out of him, now all expression was wiped from his face. Hermione wished she had the same skill to face the night. A place to go in her mind to escape the pain of betrayal and shame.

"It's time," he said.

She nodded, and he reached in his pocket and pulled out a rock. It was white and dusty—a portkey.

She swallowed hard, trying her best to control her panic. For years, she'd called herself a Gryffindor, and it was time to test that statement. Would she walk with her head held high to her sacrifice, or would she be dragged kicking and screaming? Either way would end in the same fate.

Hermione decided to be like Draco, refusing to display her emotions, refusing to give them a show. She wondered if the other muggleborns, mind-altered from fake desire, gasped for orgasm as they were raped. Did the Death Eaters enjoy seeing a young girl violated as long as she *participated*? The thought made acid spike up her throat, burning on its way back down.

No, she owned her pleasure, and she'd give it when and where she wanted. It didn't belong at the feet of men like Dolohov. She steeled her spine, determined to give them only the condemnation they deserved.

"I'm ready," Hermione said.

Stripped of his own emotion, Draco nodded his agreement. A few moments later, the portkey warmed under her hand, and they vanished.

Art by [juxtaposedmusings](#)



## Chapter 27: Venus of Willendorf

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Sevdaliza– “Human”

Gaelic words: I got these from google. I did my best.

Thank you MyPrivateInsanity for editing this.

Trigger Warning at the bottom:

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

### Venus of Willendorf

They appeared in the middle of Stonehenge, her bare feet pressing into damp earth as she caught her balance. The circle of stones looked as if a giant had assembled a toy block set and left it unattended.

Like many wizarding historical sites, Stonehenge appeared as a ruin to muggles, but the stones had held upright for thousands of years in perfect condition. In the past, it would have elicited amazement from her, thinking about the ancient people building it. But now it resembled a cage, causing her dread.

A fall chill bypassed the temporary warming charms, leaving the hair along her body raised. A multitude of stars twinkled above her, giving enough light to see about thirty Death Eaters surrounding them in their black capes and skull masks. Despite having seen Titus in his full regalia hundreds of times, the image of them en masse tugged out something forgotten from her.

*Watching from the window.*

*Red and Green—like Christmas lights.*

*I can smell you.*

Her childhood nightmare materialised. Panic welled in her, but she somehow sliced it off at the roots before it could control her. For strength, she clutched the edges of her white robe and cinched it tighter across her chest.

"You didn't give her the potion." Titus yanked off his black mask. He looked irate and pale, as if he might collapse. "She's terrified."

It hurt to see him there, standing with the men. But it seemed to hurt him too, as she stared back at him, fully aware.

Draco was void of any emotion. "She didn't want the potion."

Titus almost vibrated with visible rage, dark hair blending into the night sky. He took one step forward, but a hand landed on his shoulder. Snape, she believed, though she couldn't be sure. Titus frowned down at the hand, and as if being reminded, he grimaced and stepped back into position.

He shrugged off Snape's hand and pointed a gloved finger at Draco. "I went to great lengths to make sure this night would be gentle for her!"

"Foolish decision, boy." She recognized Dolohov's voice, belonging to a bone white mask. "If she fights and interrupts the ritual, you'll be the one punished. We've waited years for this girl to come of age. And if you just fucked it up, I won't go easy on you."

"She won't fight." Draco stole a quick, pleading glance at Hermione. "I've told her exactly what's expected of her."

"Did you now?" Dolohov sounded amused. "We'll see how well that works. After seeing her in the Trials, I suspect she might be a handful." He turned his attention to Hermione. "A single flinch, mudblood, and I'll let Nott take over."

Hermione was a rabbit trapped in a circle of wolves. What could she do but agree?

Would Titus force the potion down her throat if he had to step in? She bet he would. He'd think it was a kindness to her, a show of love. Her instinct told her to fight and flee, but her logic told her to stay put.

"Good, then let's begin." Dolohov snapped his fingers, and the horde of masked men jolted to attention and pulled out their wands simultaneously. "Flint, place the relic in the center."

A Death Eater with broad shoulders walked in, carrying a small statue that fit snugly in his large hand. Despite her terror, she looked at it in curiosity, and then in recognition.

The Venus of Willendorf.

Hermione's eyes ran along the voluptuous curves of a woman. She had a rounded belly and thighs. A crown of tight curls encircled her head, though she had no face. The stone was yellowed, but unlike the pictures she'd seen of it, the top of her head was dark.

Dried blood— she realised with a shiver.

Before Titus banned her from certain books, she'd read about statues like these. This venus statue in particular was one of the oldest known magical artefacts in the world, believed to have been carved twenty-five thousand years ago. Prehistoric humans worshipped the venus statues, carried them in their hands like talismans, though even wizards didn't know much about them.

A fake statue had been placed with the muggles in one of their museums, but the real one was kept deep in the Austrian ministry—one of the most secure places in the world.

Why did they have it here? And how did they get it?

When Flint placed it near her feet, he kept his head down and walked off without acknowledging her. The Death Eaters collectively went silent and stared at the sacred object. Pulsing magic emanated from it—wild, earthy, chaotic.

Creation magic— the strongest form of magic next to love, and possibly the least understood.

She resisted the temptation to pick it up and protect it from the eyes of the desecrators, knowing it did not belong here. She understood now that the Purebloods were attempting to break the curse by sacrificing the same people the artefact was crafted to revere, dissecting a generation of women in search for the spark of life hidden in their womb.

The primordial magic hummed like a caress, a welcome... a warning. Aeons of struggle hid in the curves of her breasts and the roundness of her hips. There was an eternity of women on the stained stone, placed there even before the curse. She heard their joy and despair like an echo from the past. It was an instinctive knowledge, a reverence to the heavy price paid for existence. While staring at the object, Hermione was reminded that her first breath originated from a million years of blood running down thighs, of tearing skin and groans of pain.

The crimson stains on the stone horrified and oddly comforted her. *You're not alone*, she thought she heard it whispered in the molecules of the air, the same words she'd whispered out loud to Katie—a wish sent through the universe.

The circle of Death Eaters tightened around her, preventing her escape. The trap snapped shut. Magic simmered in her fingertips, ready to be used. But though she wished to fight, it was a foolish urge. She'd struggled to defeat Titus the day before. Standing around her were all four mediators in full Death Eater garb, along with Severus Snape, and she knew the rest were of a similar calibre.

There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to turn.

A single sob escaped from behind her lips, before she mashed them so hard together, they ached with the pressure. At the noise, she watched Titus, now with his mask on, as he closed his gloved hand into a fist.

"Midnight has arrived on Samhain," Dolohov began. "The veil between us and the afterlife is thin, and any magic produced will be at its most powerful."

The words felt like sliding a cell door closed. The rattle of a key in a lock.

Dolohov began a chant in what she believed to be old Gaelic, deep and low. If it didn't feel sinister, it would have sounded like a song. She only caught the meaning of a few words, but the energy in the air shifted. It thrummed around her, as if rising from the Earth.

"Yaxley," Dolhov said. "The elements."

A man broke free from the wall of Death Eaters and poured salt in a wide circle around Draco and her. Then he placed a bowl of water near the edge. On the opposite side, he poured a scoop of dirt in a second bowl. In the third bowl, he threw a bundle of sticks and set them on fire with a quick *Incendio*. The branches crackled as he set a fourth bowl down, which he kept empty.

The statue near her feet began to vibrate. The hum went through her, feeling like a tremble of rage. She wondered if the men felt it— the wrongness.

They weren't supposed to be doing this. This type of magic didn't want to be played with.

She looked up to see Draco shedding his robes. He did it methodically, without the ease, confidence, or smirk from the glade. His face showed nothing, so deeply occluding, he seemed like a second statue. His skin glowed like alabaster under the moonlight as the robe slipped off his shoulders, puddling on the ground. Then, with a flick of his wand, the bundle of cloth rose in the air and rearranged behind her. She knew it was to make the cold ground more comfortable. Even now, she admired his form. Broad shoulders had filled out from when she last saw him, trim waist. A small trail of hair went from his lower abdomen to his cock, which wasn't erect.

Draco didn't even look at her, eyes above her head, as he uncapped a potion he held in his hand, drinking it while giving one frown in disgust.

"What's the matter, Malfoy?" An anonymous voice asked from the crowd. "Can't get hard on your own?"

"Not when I know your ugly face is here."

She didn't have to guess what the potion was for. Within a few moments, his cock went erect.

Was he embarrassed to be naked in front of other people? He didn't seem to be, though that might just be the occlusion.

The crowd waited. It took her a second to realise they expected her to shed her robes like Draco. Terror raced through her. She swayed once, digging her fingers even harder into the white robe.

The word "no" lingered on her lips. But she remembered Dolohov's warning and her promise to Draco. Her eyes naturally went to Titus, staring at his black mask. Both his gloved hands were still in hard fists, as if took everything in him to not rip her from the circle. One dragon hide boot moved forward.

A part of her wanted him to.

*Save me*, she knew her eyes were pleading, but she hated herself for the foolish hope.

Maybe she should have taken the potion, or at least gotten drunk. Would it have been so horrid to forget what was happening? The reality of getting naked while sober was more horrific than even her imagination.

Accidental magic zipped out of her, lifting pebbles into the air. They hovered like a curtain. She didn't remember the last time she ever felt fear like this.

"Magnificent," she heard a man whisper. "I think she'll be the one."

"Quiet, Mulciber. The girl needs to control her magic and comply like she said she would." Dolohov's voice was hard as stone.

She'd be an idiot not to catch the threat. Hermione willed the pebbles to return to the Earth.

"The ritual can happen whether she wears the robe or not." Draco sneered at the crowd. "Her body is mine. I earned it, and none of you lecherous fucks get to see it."

"Lucius—" Dolohov said. "I see that your possessive streak has been inherited. Inform your son that he needs to play by our rules if he wants to keep his little prize."

"The girl stays clothed," Lucius answered. She didn't dare turn her head to find which masked man he was.

"She—"

"Hermione keeps her robe on," Titus cut Dolohov off.

The rest of the Death Eaters shifted in discomfort at the disagreement. It seemed Lucius and Titus made a formidable team.

"Very well," Dolohov said, clearly annoyed. "The girl can keep her robe, but the ritual must proceed."

Shame already ate through her pride. How could she ever walk among these men with her head held high? Could she endure the knowing smirks? Even without baring her skin, they'd soon see the most intimate moment of her life, something that should have been private.

No, she wouldn't give them her shame, she decided. They could try and steal the tender parts of her and display them as trophies all they wanted, but all they would get from her would be sharp knives and the slicing cold of winter. Nothing would be given freely.

She straightened, determined not to show them any emotion, even panic.

Draco walked forward until he stood in front of her. He reached out and cradled her cheek.

"It's time," he said.

She gave a single nod, and the chanting began again. She followed Draco's lead as he pushed on her shoulders, until she lay on his white robe. She kept her own robe firmly together, and her whole body went stiff with fear.

The energy whipped around her, the old magic, as if attempting to soothe her. It brushed across her skin in comforting waves.



Draco hovered over her. His grey eyes stared down at her, and he buried one hand in her curls. She felt his erection, pressed near her thigh.

"I'll try to make it fast," he whispered.

A nudge of consciousness tickled the edges of her mind, and she tried to push it out.

"Trust me," he whispered, making eye contact. "Don't look away."

She decided to leap again and allowed him inside her mind.

An image of books exploded behind her eyes. Books on top of books, stacked in perfect lines on old bookcases.

A library.

Malfoy manor, she assumed.

Hermione almost gasped. Draco was projecting—an advanced form of legilimency. It required placing thoughts and images into the other person's mind. Only a few, powerful wizards could do it.

The fact Draco could stunned her, though it made sense. Occlumency and legilimency were different, but if one was proficient at one, they were usually adept at the other.

Hermione was partially aware of reality. The chanting still filtered through, spiking her heart rate. The magic whispered its secrets along her skin. If she concentrated, she could see a sea of black robes and skull masks.

"This will be yours," Draco whispered once he noticed her attention wandering.

In the image, he walked forward and pulled out an autobiography of Alfedra the Cruel. She'd read it before, but she thought it might be the latest edition with several new chapters and annotations. It looked so real to her with the fairy lights glittering. Nott library had always been moody, and Malfoy manor resembled it, sporting dark wooden wainscoting and leaded windows. Ancient leather chairs and tables were scattered strategically. The sight calmed her.

But not enough.

His wand touched the center of her thighs, and he whispered a spell. Wetness dripped down her skin.

"Lubrication," he whispered out loud.

She nodded and allowed him to enter her mind again, but this time it was a true memory.

A young Malfoy stood in front of the mirror. He wore a tiny suit, looking about the same age as at the party. He had his pale hair slicked back in the pretentious way he used to wear it, and he held Hopper in his hands.

"This is yours." He held out the old bunny, as if someone could grab it. "I hope you don't mind that I slept with him sometimes—" He cut himself off and shook his head, cheeks brightening, as if he hadn't meant to say that. "No," he scowled. "That makes me sound stupid. She wouldn't want to be friends with a ninny."

"I think she would," a woman's voice said, though she couldn't see her face. "Being kind doesn't make you a ninny. She'll be so relieved to have him back, I think."

"I'm not sure I like being kind. Besides, maybe she's forgotten the dumb bunny."

The woman took a moment to answer.

"We never truly forget the things we love."

Hermione wondered who the voice belonged to. He was too old for it to have been his mother. Maybe it was a nanny.

The feel of her dress pushing up her legs ripped her again from the memory. She kept his grey stare as he brought it up just enough while still keeping her covered from the prying eyes. He pressed his hand between her legs to separate them. The pressure was light enough it felt like he was asking for permission. She trembled as she opened and let him rest where he needed, cradling him between her thighs.

"Look at me," he whispered.

A second memory. In this one they were in the astronomy tower, right after their first kiss. Her lips were pink, hair tousled. The diamond rose necklace glittered when she moved. She watched as she gave a grin and vanished on her way back to Theo. Once she was gone, Draco walked over and leaned against the balcony, close enough to the edge it made her nervous. But the height didn't bother Draco. He touched his lips, wearing a true smile. It lit up his face. And then he tugged out a broom from his pocket, expanding it on contact, and zoomed off into the sky, doing flips and rolls in celebration, flinging both his arms open to the moon.

The chanting stopped a moment, and she was brought back to reality. Draco lined himself up.

She thought he'd give her more time, but with a deep breath he pushed inside in one hard stroke. There was a slight tearing sensation inside her, despite the lubrication. He felt too big for her.

Her hand went up to his shoulder with surprise, as if to push him away, but she only dug her nails into his flesh.

"Holy fuck." His eyes rolled back as they shut in pleasure, and he groaned and leaned his head down, mouth against her shoulder. "Did I hurt you?"

She waited for intense pain. It did sting, but after the initial tear, it didn't hurt as much as she thought it would. It felt odd more than anything, stretched in a way she didn't think she could be.

"No," she whispered back, and his shoulders caved a little.

"Now boy," she heard Dolohov growl. "You need to start and last until the end of the ritual."

"Give me a moment."

Draco once again lifted himself on the palms of his hands. His tousled hair hung over his eyes, and he bit his bottom lip. They were still connected. She wiggled on instinct to adjust her body, feeling uncomfortable.

"Stop moving," he hissed. "Or I'm going to cum in you right now."

She stilled. She turned her head to the side, and she saw the Death Eaters staring down on her behind the masks. Her breathing increased, and she felt like she might vomit.

Draco's hand went to her chin, turning her head back toward his grey stare.

"Don't look at them," he said. "They don't deserve your attention."

"You need to start, son," she heard Lucius drawl. Draco clenched his jaw.

"Fuck them all." He began to move inside her.

Across the circle, each of the men pulled out wicked daggers, dripping with dark magic. After sliding off a single glove, they sliced their palms in unison. Tilting their hands, they squeezed, letting their blood drip on the ground. Magic syphoned it into rivulets, resembling veins, the blood spreading to the salt, mingling with it as it encircled them.

The discomfort was gone, so she watched him above her as he moved. Keeping their eyes locked, he tried to show her another memory, but he couldn't concentrate enough to project. His face contorted in pleasure, and he bit his bottom lip as if hating that he felt it.

The world around her vanished as she studied him. If she focused, she could pretend it was just him and her.

"Goath," Dolohov said. The empty bowl cracked in half, and a gust of wind twirled around them. It was fast and furious, like a miniature tornado, whipping their hair around, but it ended fast.

Draco scrunched his eyebrows.

"Fuck, I don't know how I'm going to last." He was going excruciatingly slow, and when she adjusted her hips by spreading them wider, he made a noise of despair in the back of his throat.

When the wind died down, Dolohov raised his knife.

"Uisge." The second bowl cracked, and a sudden wall of water rose up and encircled them. The crowd of Death Eaters were obscured from their vision, making it seem oddly private.

"It will be over soon." Draco capitalised on the seclusion by stopping and staring down at her. "Very soon if you keep fucking wiggling like that."

She didn't know what came over her, but the thought of making him break with a slight movement intrigued her. She brushed her legs up along his thighs, clenching her lower body. The muscles of his chest tightened, hands digging into her skin.

"Bloody hell, I'm starting to think you like to be cruel." The water crashed back into the Earth, sucking inside it as if it had never existed. Draco began to move again as if he'd never stopped.

"Talamh," Dolohov's deep voice could be heard over the water dissipating.

Almost immediately, the third bowl cracked and a curtain of soil, resembling the pebbles she'd raised earlier, surrounded them. It completely blocked any view of the others.

"We're alone again," Draco whispered. This time when he stopped moving, he lifted her dress to gaze at where his cock was buried in her. His groan made something flutter inside her, a warmth that trickled down her limbs. This was what it should have been— these stolen moments.

He pulled out and pressed inside her, watching it as if amazed.

"It's torture not releasing inside you. It's taking all my control." Her body felt hot at the words. She tried to bury the sudden spark of desire inside her, but her body didn't obey her. How could she feel this after promising herself not to? How could she feel desire with a crowd of Death Eaters, even if they were out of view?

The dirt began to drop, and he covered her with her robe again.

When he began to move, the sensation could be felt in her stomach and her thighs.

It didn't feel bad at all. In fact, the tension as he pushed up inside her left behind a familiar tingle. She bit her lip to hide the effect it had on her, but one of her hands lifted and rested on the side of his abdomen, feeling the muscles move with his slow thrusts.

"Theine." The final bowl cracked, and a wall of flames erupted around her. The heat was instant and intense. But there was nowhere to cower from it.

Their skin glowed. Draco stopped moving again, one hand still curled in her hair. With the sudden privacy, he leaned down and hovered right over her lips.

He searched her expression slowly as if asking for permission. She licked her lips in preparation as he pressed their lips together. Their mouths opened, tongues briefly touching, followed by a quick nip of her bottom lip. A stolen kiss, just like all their others.

The fire roared next to them, cutting off the view of the Death Eaters. Hermione took her chance. Her hands firmed on his waist and when he gave a thrust, she met it with her own, letting herself whimper with the curling sensation in her stomach. It was a phantom of the pleasure she'd felt in the glade and at Malkins, and definitely not a release, but it was enough.

Draco froze.

"Did that—"

The fire died down, leaving his question unanswered, but he already knew. His eyes closed a moment, as if the thought of her feeling any pleasure was too much for him to stand.

"Finally." With the next thrust, he stilled and released inside her, holding her hips tight.

He was panting, the weight of his body pressing down on her. Sweat dripped down her neck and into her robe as they stared at each other. The lingering heat of the fire left her skin warmed.

"What's next?" She asked with him still inside her. She dared not search out Titus or anyone. It felt too intimate.

He grimaced. "This part might hurt."

Draco pulled out of her, careful to keep her covered. He reached up and swiped his fingers around her tender skin, causing only a slight discomfort, a relic of the tear.

He brought his hand up, glistening with his release, tinged pink with blood—virgin blood.

The hand with the blood drifted to the statue resting near her, and he smeared it on the crown of the venus' head.

She thought that was it, but Draco held her down hard, once again occluding. He tried to enter her mind, but in her fear she pushed him away.

"What are you doing?"

"It's almost over." He tugged her hips toward him.

"Almost? I thought—"

Draco's free hand once again reached down to her inner thighs. He swiped at the fluid there with his thumb, a mixture of blood and semen. Then he slid his hand under her robe and placed his thumb on top of her lower stomach.

"Nine marks. That's all we need."

She almost asked another question, but then he swiped down, and searing pain blinded her. She bucked in agony, but he kept her pinned. A second drag of his thumb on her skin, and a scream was ripped from her throat.

After the third mark, she lost count. It felt like her insides were burning, as if a knife was carving into her stomach to yank out her guts.

"Stop," she pleaded through her screams. "Please, stop."

She lost her words after that. She placed both her hands near her neck as if to tear her veins apart to release the lava.

"I'm sorry," she heard him whisper again. She attempted to scramble away out of pure instinct, no longer in control of her actions. "You need to stop fighting me."

Was she fighting? She realised that her hands weren't on her neck, but on his. Red welts from her nails decorated the skin of his face and chest.

"Settle her," Dolohov commanded.

Draco held her down hard, eyes guarded, and swiped another time.

"You're killing me," she moaned. It hurt so badly, she thought she might have wished for death out loud. Begged for it.

"Only one more," he said.

"No, no no," she cried.

She grit her teeth in preparation, and he swiped down hard one more time.

The pain dissipated, like popping a bubble. Her whole body arched, lifting from the ground, and a golden light glowed under her skin. The statue vibrated beside her, glowing as bright as the sun. Power, pure power. It lingered inside her, but it didn't belong to her. There was a moment of silence, and then, as if giving birth, a wave of magic exploded from her, rushing in all directions, causing the Death Eaters to stumble.

It took a moment for everyone to recover from the blast of energy, standing back up, readjusting robes and masks.

Draco reached for her as she collapsed back into the earth. She tried to curl away from him, but he tugged her up into a hard hug, her mouth meeting his shoulder as she trembled and sobbed. He smelled familiar, comforting. Like Hopper.

"It's over," he said, stroking her jaw with his thumb while he laid her flat again. "There's no more pain. I just need to bind you to me. That's it."

She whimpered, unsure she could withstand anything more, but he didn't listen.

He said the binding spell. She was too far gone to catch the specifics. It required a single drop of blood from each of them on each other's tongues. She sobbed as he put his thumb to her lips, leaving behind the taste of copper, and then he picked up her finger. After a small cut to her finger, he sucked on it.

The magic this time wasn't painful. It felt like a hot cup of cocoa, comforting and snug. Curling up near a fire, book in hand. His warm hand hovered over her stomach. The binding magic partially soothed the burning ache left from the ritual.

When he pulled back, he whispered in her ear. "It's done."

"It was never that powerful before," one of the Death Eaters said. The voice brought Hermione back to the reality that people stood around her—discussing her. "This may be it."

Hermione found it hard to concentrate. She was panting. Her whole body shivered from the latent pain. Draco had retreated from her mind, and he brushed a strand of damp hair from her forehead.

"Someone needs to check to see if it worked," Dolohov said.

"I'll do it," she recognized Lucius' voice.

Draco looked up with a hostile expression as his father walked closer, and he straightened her robe so it covered her legs.

Lucius reached down and picked up the statue that rested next to them. He stared at the Venus of Willendorf, as if it was a puzzle he couldn't solve.

"Have mercy on us," he said. "End this torture."

In one furious stroke, he lifted it into the air and smashed it against a broken stone. The ancient relic splintered into shards.

Hermione gasped in surprise, and everyone went silent. The Death Eaters stared at the stone.

One second. Two. Three. Four.

Lucius took off his mask.

"I think it—"

The scrape of stone against stone echoed as the blood-stained statue slowly reassembled, one piece after the other, until it was whole once more.

Lucius went pale.

"No!" Titus yelled from the side, a deep sound in the back of his throat, and he swayed on his feet.

Dolohov accioed the restored statue; it was dwarfed by his giant palm. He grimaced at it, as if he hated it more than anything in the world. In the recesses of Hermione's mind, she recognized that this statue was the origin of the curse. Why else were they working so hard to destroy it? But she also had a deep sense his anger might be connected to something else. Why would Dolohov care about babies? It didn't make any sense, and she knew she was missing something important.

Dolohov's furious gaze went to her, no longer amused, and his lips curled into a frown.

"How disappointing." He pocketed the statue. "Avery, we'll need to change our approach for the next time. If this didn't work with her, it won't work with the others. Maybe there's a variation of language we can try. We need to filter out all possibilities, especially when it's the Potter girl's turn. She's nearly of age. Have you thought about when you're going to do the Trials, Severus?"

There was a moment of silence. It seemed like Snape hesitated.

"Not until she's older. I promised her mother I'd wait."

"I think you should consider moving up the date. Time is... of the essence. Let us all remember what happened in China. That could be us at any time. If this continues not to work, we might need to lower the age for the Trials. There are three muggleborns close to fifteen, but I think the Potter girl is more promising. She's the first child born after the curse. It's imperative we see if she's fertile or not, but we also can't waste virgin blood with something this important. I'm not sure how much longer we have left."

Snape made a noise of disgust.

"She's a *child*. The girl might not be of my own blood, but I consider her mine."

"I think she's old enough. Maybe for the winter solstice."

"She'll enter the Trials when I say so, and not a moment sooner."

Dolohov's lips thinned.

"We'll discuss this at a later date. When you're capable of seeing reason, perhaps."

Reality crashed into her. Whatever they had meant to do with her didn't work. It had all been for nothing. *Everything* had been for nothing— her pain, her shame.

Though a large part of her was glad they were denied what they wanted, it only meant they'd keep subjecting girls to what she'd just experienced.

Dolhohov sighed and vanished with a pop. One after the other, the rest of the Death Eaters disappeared.

"You did well, son." Lucius walked closer, but Draco twisted his head with a snarl, dropping his occlumency with his father's presence. Lucius paused for a moment. "I'm proud—"

"Don't *fucking* talk to me," Draco seethed, baring his teeth, his lips pulled back as if he was an animal about to attack. He had one hand on the ground next to her head, still leaning over her, as if to protect her. He reached for his wand and pointed it at his father.

She'd never seen Lucius surprised, but both his eyebrows raised.

"I understand your anger, but it was necess—"

"My anger?" Draco spat. "You think you *understand* my anger? Get the fuck away from me. You got what you wanted, now leave me be."

Lucius hesitated. She swore he might have looked wounded. But she found she had no pity for him.



Zaps of burning pain still randomly shot through her veins— remnants from the ritual. Still in shock, her mind trudged through something viscous, unable to pull herself out.

Lucius sighed and stepped back.

"We'll talk again when you're in a better mood."

Lucius apparated away. As soon as his father vanished, Draco went pale.

"Granger," he asked. "Are you— do you— oh, fuck."

He bolted to his feet and rushed to the stones of the Stonehenge and vomited. She heard him retching over and over.

Hermione just laid there in a numb trance, staring up at the stars, tracing the constellations. In one of the history books her godfather gave her, she'd discovered that humans had already touched the glowing white surface. Had already travelled into the infinite darkness.

Hermione wondered how a person could be born to that life, so free they could travel to the stars. She wondered what it might feel like to walk on the moon and touch the edge of the known universe, go farther than any person. Did their souls lift with the lack of gravity in the millisecond they bounced before landing again? Maybe it was the closest a human could reach the idea of forever.

Familiar footsteps walked toward her, crunching the gravel below, but she found it hard to concentrate. She'd forgotten that Titus was still there until he hovered over her. He stumbled and collapsed, kneeling beside her prone body, throwing off his mask.

"Sprite," he said, voice cracking. Tears streamed down his face, red and sweaty from the fire. She'd never seen him cry. One gloved hand reached out and touched her cheek gently as if she might break. "I told him—you were supposed to drink the wine. I made sure it would alter your state of mind. You wouldn't have remembered anything."

Did he think that was any better? Of course he did. Maybe he was right in a way. But how terrifying it would have been to wake up with pain between her thighs and no memory of what occurred. She'd have lost her virginity to the darkness.

She let herself sit up. Titus reached out to help her, but she shoved his hand away. The shock was twisting into her chest, breathing fire through her.

The pain in between her thighs and on her lower stomach gave twinges as she stood. She suspected the ritual would leave permanent scars on her abdomen. Bright red bloomed across the white, the wounds still raw. She wobbled like an old woman, and Titus steadied her. In a moment of pure rage, she straightened and smacked him hard on the face. His head twisted to the side with the force, and his cheek already bloomed with colour.

"You *knew*." Her voice sounded foreign to her ears. "You've always known, and yet... and yet you still let me believe you loved me." Her insides felt cold. "You let *me* love *you*."

She wished to purge the love for him from her body, but it clung tight to her soul.

"What do you mean? Of course, I fucking love you!" His face crumpled in agony. "Do you think I had a choice. But— I would have been gentle and fast. I wouldn't have hurt you like he did. That was the most agonising thing I've ever endured. To see you so scared and in pain as he violated you, looking at me as if I could help you."

Hermione realised Titus truly believed what he said. Did that make it a lie or a truth? She conceded she didn't know enough about the situation to make a judgement, that she was missing something important. Everything was too confusing. Was it love to attempt to shield someone from painful things? Maybe, but at the moment it didn't feel like it. Could betrayal and love exist in the same action?

"Sprite—"

"I'm not your Sprite anymore," she spat. "I'm Draco's."

It sounded like a hammer striking a nail.

As if reminded, his pain slid off his face. He placed a single hand on his heart as if to protect it.

"You'll *always* belong to me."

She felt heat at her back. Draco had returned.

"As she said," Draco pointed his wand at him over her shoulder. "She's *mine*."

Titus took one more look at her face, as if memorising it. Tears still wet his cheeks. Then his eyes glanced down to the front of the robe— at the blood stains.

"If I stay here one more second, I'm going to rip out his heart," he growled, accioed his mask, and then he vanished.

She stared at the empty spot where he'd stood, and then she leaned down and grabbed Draco's robe, dirty and crumpled on the ground.

The loss of her virginity meant nothing to her. Men fought for the right to be the first between a woman's thighs, but she didn't understand why. She'd never put the importance on it that other people did. Why would it matter so much? She was the same person.

But the pain of the ritual changed her. The illusion of security that had kept her sheltered from the world had been ripped from her, exposing the dangers surrounding her. She grieved most the loss of the trust she'd placed in the people she'd loved.

She knew now that men like Dolohov wanted to crush her. But she wouldn't let them, if only to spite them.

She turned toward Draco and handed his robe over to him. He put it on and wiped his mouth, as they stared at each other, unsure how to proceed, knowing she didn't trust him either.

"Take me home," she said.

By [Frau Blucher](#)



## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Rape/ noncon, torture

# Chapter 28: A Decent Offer

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestions will be at the bottom now.

Update Schedule: This time of year I always get SAD (seasonal depression). I've avoided it so far, but to protect myself from burn out during the winter, I'm going to slow down my updates to every other week. This will last until after Easter (mid-April) when I plan to get back to once-a-week updates after I get more vitamin D. I petition that we start considering hibernation as a species. Next update will be February 5th.

Art: Frau Blucher made another beautiful art piece! I put it on the bottom of ch.12, Bee to a Flower. It shows Theo bringing Hermione to Draco for their first date.

Thank you, MyPrivateInsanity for being the best beta!

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

## A Decent Offer

After apparating, they arrived in front of Malfoy Manor. Though her mind was still trudging through molasses, she managed to glance around in subdued fascination.

The Nott grounds always had a wildness to them— sprites zooming through the leaves, gnomes peeking through the brush. It resisted being contained and groomed. In contrast, the Malfoy grounds looked to be kept in strict order. The gravel walkway glowed pure white, stark against the manicured hedges, even in the darkness. The moon shone bright over the white stone structure, looming before her like a beacon under the stars.

A pale spectre walked across their path. Hermione blinked a few times before she comprehended that she stared at an albino peacock.

"Is that the homicidal one?" she asked, remembering his loathing of the peacock Alfred.

Malfoy's lips twitched once, before his expression fell again.

"Lucky for you, no. Alfred's progeny are just as bloodthirsty though. You'll meet them soon enough. This one is named Griffin. He might be the dumbest living thing I've ever encountered. He probably doesn't even know where he is. I'm not sure how he survived to adulthood."

Indeed, the peacock seemed to be rotating in confused circles.

This time Hermione's lip twitched, though it dropped fast. Everything hurt too much. Her spirit rubbed raw under her ribs. Each attempt at emotion brought agony.

She brushed away her thoughts before they could choke her and followed Draco as he entered his manor, gravel crunching under their feet. The old iron doors opened to a magnificent sight. A wide pale staircase curved up to lofty heights. It had shiny marble flooring and stone walls, with velvet emerald curtains framing the largest windows she'd ever seen. The foyer was taller and more open than Nott manor, with several chandeliers to light their way. Landscape art pieces and portraits lined the upper walls, surrounded by ornate frames. It was much brighter and lighter in tone than Nott manor, absent of the familiar suit of armour and outdated, gaudy gold accents she'd come to love.

Her soul mourned for a moment— a sharp ache of homesickness. Injured, mentally and physically, she wanted nothing more than Bitty and Tabitha, a warm bath, and her soft bed.

"Welcome home," Draco said.

It didn't feel like home.

"Will your father be staying here?"

"No." He paused and curled his hand into a fist. "He knows I'd probably curse him right now. We have several other properties that he can go to and rot inside. It will just be us."

Arriving at her new home made her remember the journey to Nott manor, the way she'd clutched at Titus, smelling of cinnamon. The instant pain almost broke her, understanding that in many ways he hadn't been her saviour. Even though he loved her, he'd been her jailor. And no matter what Malfoy told her about her new home, she knew all she'd done was trade one gilded cage for another.

---

She followed him, scaling the grand staircase into a maze of corridors. The old portraits whispered as she ascended— one even hissed "mudblood!"— until Draco threatened them with removal.

She clutched her robe tight around her, wishing to cleanse herself. Hermione wondered if she would ever feel clean again.

They ended at a set of impressive double doors with the Malfoy crest carved into the center. Draco put a hand on the door, activating the blood wards, and then he glanced back, eyes roving over her face as if to assess her mood. She found it hard to read him, as usual, but she thought she might have seen a flash of something that resembled longing.

The door opened with a creak, revealing a room that rivalled Titus', dark and moody. Heavy ebony furniture decorated the room. The only other colour was a dark red bedspread— his favourite colour, she remembered.

Hermione was a girl used to luxury, but even she was impressed by the sight before her. Thick black curtains covered the walls and framed the four-poster bed. Other than that, his

room held little decoration, beside a few photos displayed on shelves and tabletops.

In one, his whole Slytherin team hovered in the air on their brooms after a victory, the celebratory fireworks bursting in the background. Beside it was another of him and Goyle, both sneering at the camera, and surprisingly one of Theo flying alongside him.

On his bedside table perched a photo of Draco as a baby in the arms of his mother. Hermione walked forward and picked it up to view it better. She'd never seen his mum before. A delicate woman stared back, the sister of Bellatrix Lestrange. Silvery hair went past her shoulders with black strands mixed. Baby Draco kept taking fistfuls of it, attempting to chew, while his mother patiently detangled the pudgy fingers with a soft smile.

"It's the only photo I have of her," he said behind her. "My father has taken the rest."

Pity trickled from her brain into her stomach, watching this moment forever lost in time. But an intense jealousy replaced it, because she didn't have a similar photograph. Was there a moment in time where her own mother glanced down at her with patient love? Was there an image of her father rocking her? If there was, she'd never seen one. The only pictures she had of them rested in her memories. She couldn't conjure their faces even if she tried.

"This is your room?"

"It is," Draco answered.

Did he expect for them to share a bed? A blush threatened to overtake her cheeks at the thought. She shook her head, wondering why she felt so awkward at the idea. She currently had his cum on her thighs and stomach. It shouldn't be more intimate than that, but somehow it was.

Hermione glanced at the other bedside table. Her own face smiled back, standing next to Theo. She bet he'd somehow gotten the photo from her brother.

Theo...

Did he know about the ritual? Or had he been as in the dark as Draco? She wished to share a bed again with him like they'd done as kids. She'd curl up beside him, wrap their fingers together. He'd be her flotation charm, keeping her above the rough waves.

"You have a photo of me?" Hermione turned around to view Draco.

He still refused to look at her. She wished she knew him enough to detangle his expressions. Was he thinking how the reality of obtaining her was different from his fantasy?

A little elf popped into the room before he could answer. She held a delicate cream silk nightgown with embroidered roses that bloomed with each twist of fabric.

"This is Mipsy," he explained. "She'll help you get clean and dressed. She's been— well, she's been very excited to finally get to meet you."

"Hello Mipsy."

Mipsy blushed with pleasure.

Hermione really wanted Bitty, but she nodded and followed Malfoy's elf into the bathroom.

---

The bathroom, like the rest of the manor, was luxurious. A giant rainfall shower was stationed in the center, and beside it rested a large tub big enough to swim in, already filled with steaming water. Flower petals floated on the surface, and she watched as Mipsy poured a pink potion in, meant to soothe aching muscles.

With the privacy, she shed her robe. For the first time, she studied what had been done to her. Nine marks marred her skin on her lower stomach. Solid lines, each raw and bleeding.

"Mipsy cannot heal those." The elf frowned at the wounds. "Blood magic needs to heal on its own, but Mipsy has a salve for after."

"Will they be permanent?"

Mipsy blinked. Her ears twitched, showing her discomfort.

"Yes."

Hermione found she didn't care. The ritual scarred her soul. She'd rather it be visible, as a reminder.

"Is the Malfoy binding spell permanent?"

Mipsy paused, as if horrified by the thought. "Is Mistress Hermione thinking of leaving—"

"No," she assured her. "I'd just like to know."

"The binding marriage magic Master Draco used can be reversed. Or so the elves whisper."

Most wizards dismissed what the elves knew. But their memories were long. They held a more comprehensive history of the families— especially when it came to their magic— than what a person could find in a library.

She gave a nod, and then when Mipsy beckoned her forward, Hermione sank into the warmth of the bath, hissing with the pain of her wounds.

---

When Mipsy left the room to get a hair potion, Hermione tugged herself out, dripping along the marble floor, and picked up her stained robe. Searching the fabric, she found the poison she'd concealed, and ripped the seams. The vial tumbled out into her hands. She hesitated, wondering if she should dump it down the sink before anyone saw it.

Fearing the elf would appear at any time, she opened a random drawer under the sink. Finding it empty, she stashed the vial toward the back and put a simple concealment charm on it with wandless magic.

She'd need to renew it every week or so, but the charm should hide it from the elves while she contemplated what to do with it. Satisfied with the hiding spot, she shut the door and stood up.

Just in time.

"Oh, Mistress Hermione," she heard a diminutive voice beside her. "You shouldn't have gotten out without Mipsy."

---

Several hours later, she emerged clean again with her hair brushed, dried, and curled. She wore the acromantula spidersilk nightgown Draco provided, more luxurious than anything she'd ever owned. It must have cost a fortune and slid like water against her skin.

Exhaustion tugged at her body. She wished for nothing more than to enter oblivion and not return for a long time.

Draco sat in a wingback chair near his fireplace, facing the bed. He still wore his white robe. The front gaped open showing his alabaster skin, and he rested his head against the fingers of his left hand, keeping his head tilted, as he watched her crawl into his bed, getting under the covers.

"I'll need a bonnet," she said.

"A what?"

"For my hair," she explained. "My curls will— oh, it doesn't matter I suppose."

But Mispy had already popped away on the hunt for one.

Draco grimaced and stood up, holding two potions. When he walked over, he extended his hand, and she couldn't stop the flinch at his proximity. Logically, she understood that he had no choice in what he did, but her body didn't care. If possible, his frown deepened. She'd never seen him look so miserable.

"I'm not getting under the covers with you, Granger," he said. "I'll spend the night— elsewhere. I merely wanted you to have the most comfortable bed. This is just a sleeping draught." He held up another vial. "And this is a contraceptive potion."

She drank the dreamless sleep, hoping her nightmares didn't overcome the potion like they sometimes did. But when she went to swallow the contraceptive, Draco stopped her with a hand on her wrist. The touch burned through her before he quickly pulled away.

"Eventually, we'll have to conceive a child," he said. "But we're only required to produce one."

"I'm not an idiot."

"Of course not." He visibly bit his cheek. "It's just if you don't ever want to—be intimate with me again, then you can let nature take its course. There's a chance you could get pregnant,



relieving you of any future duty."

The offer made her heart lurch. He still looked ill and pale.

The sex and the pain that came afterward mingled in her mind. Just the thought made her whole body shudder with tension. Her body recoiled, remembering the agony.

She shook her head. "No, I don't think I could stand to be pregnant right now."

Maybe he understood, because he grimaced again and stepped away. She drank the potion, tasting the bitter notes of oak bark.

Draco hesitated by her bed. His eyes weren't on her, but on the red covers encasing her.

"There's no need to be afraid," he said. "I won't touch you again unless you want me to."

Her heart pounded, wondering at the way her soul twisted at his words.

"What if I *never* want you to?"

"Granger—" he whispered, still unwilling to look at her. "After tonight, I fully expect you to never want me to touch you again."

Hermione took in the defeated bent of his posture. His fists clenched. Mouth in a thin line.

"But if we don't conceive a child, they'd eventually try to take me away."

"I dare them to try," he seethed in a hard voice. "Tonight was the last night I ever play by their fucking rules. You don't need to worry. I won't hurt you ever again." As if he couldn't stand to be in her presence a moment longer, he turned and exited the room, leaving her to curl into his sheets. Despite all of the horror she'd endured, the scent of him still comforted her as she fell asleep.

---

Hermione woke up to find Mipsy an inch from her face. She gave a low shout of surprise, scrambling away.

Mipsy looked distressed, but she still bounced on her toes in excitement.

"Master Draco told Mipsy to keep a close eye on Mistress Hermione. Mipsy waited patiently for Mistress to wake up. Come, come, breakfast is waiting."

Hermione's heart beat fast from the surprise, but then she snorted out a laugh. House elves sometimes took their commands *literally*. Draco had told the elf to keep a close eye on her, and Mipsy followed the order without question.

Hermione smiled at the little elf—surprised she even could—finding the creature endearing, reminding her too much of Bitty.

Hermione allowed the elf to wash and clean her again, used to an elf helping her get ready for the day. The routine calmed her. After donning another silk dress, much too grand for everyday, she fidgeted while being led down the stairs.

A full breakfast awaited her in the breakfast nook, though her stomach tumbled too much to eat but a few bites of toast and a grilled tomato. The room gave a great view of a garden, and she sipped on a cup of tea, letting the peace envelop her.

When finished, another elf named Minty cleared the table. Hermione almost got up, unsure what else to do with her day.

Before she could think too hard about it, Draco walked inside the room and hurtled to a stop when their eyes met. He visibly swallowed and trekked forward as if on a mission. When he got to her, he slapped a scroll down in front of her, along with a quill and ink pot.

"Make your list," he said.

"List?"

"Of what you want in life. Like I promised. Write down your every dream and desire, no matter how extravagant, and I'll do my best to provide it."

Hermione chewed her bottom lip. She almost asked for clarification, because surely he didn't mean *everything*, but Malfoy exited with a furious flutter of his cloak as if he still couldn't stand to be in the same room with her.

Hermione smoothed out the parchment and dipped the quill nib into the ink.

If he wanted to offer her *everything*, then she'd give him a list that could challenge him.

---

Twenty minutes later, she went on a hunt for Draco. She found him in one of the front rooms at a writing desk, filling out a scroll. A book on rare potions lay open beside him.

Hermione wondered what he did for a career. She'd heard from Theo that he'd turned down an auror position. Did he work at all? He certainly didn't need to with the level of wealth he had, though she doubted Lucius would allow his heir to sit idle among his treasures.

Draco looked up as she walked inside and tensed as she got closer, but he was occluding too much for her to guess what he felt. He was no longer the carefree boy who flew her to the glade. The man in front of her felt like a stranger—harder, angrier. The night before made it awkward to exist around him.

She handed him her scroll and watched as he unrolled it to read the contents. A little smirk tugged up the side of his lip as his eyes pursued her notes.

"Number one," he read out loud. "Unrestricted access to the manor's library, potion room, and duelling room." He looked up. "Honestly Granger, you're making this too easy." His eyes flicked back down. "Access to any magical object in the manor. A new wand, if possible. Ability to see Theo or friends any time you desire. The ability to travel to Diagon Alley or

Hogsmeade without permission. An owl. A career. Acquire Hopper. Acquire—" He glanced up. "What the fuck is a Crookshanks?"

"My cat."

He seemed to consider that.

"If he's with Nott, it might be... difficult to get him, but I'll find a way." Draco looked back down at the list. "Teach you apparition. And Occlumency." At the last one, he finally hesitated. "A visit to your old muggle home, along with a photograph of your parents."

He slowly set down the scroll, leaned back in his chair, linking both hands on his chest, and stared at her, eyes picking her apart. Titus prided himself in his ability to read people, but she thought Draco might be better. It made her feel oddly self-conscious.

"Your wish is my command." He bit his bottom lip and slowly dragged it out. She watched the movement with fascination. "I thought the list would be longer."

"I might think of more," she warned, wondering how far she could push. Titus would have shut her down long ago, unwilling to give her anything that might endanger her.

"I hope you do. After all, I have a lifetime now to spoil you."

Her heart lurched, though she wished it didn't. He looked like a Fae prince sitting in the morning light filtering through the window behind him, glinting off his pale hair. She thought of him moving over her under the stars, eyes filled with guilty pleasure, and a blush heated her cheeks.

No, she needed to stop thinking about that. Because despite what he promised, she still didn't feel safe or comfortable enough around him to allow herself to trust him.

He must have seen her sudden shift of mood, because he cocked his head to the side.

"Would you like to cross off an item on your list?"

---

Draco walked through the corridors, and she trailed behind him. It felt like a maze, though it didn't seem much bigger overall than Nott manor.

They stopped in front of a nondescript door.

With permission, he pricked her finger and smeared a crimson drop on the door handle, showing they protected it with blood wards. It glowed after he mixed it with a drop of his own blood.

"You now have unrestricted access to the library." The lock clicked open. "Are you ready?"

She'd never been more ready. Excitement buzzed along her skin. She wondered how she could feel the beam of happiness in her soul after what she'd endured. But it couldn't be contained. She nearly vibrated on her toes.

"Well, hurry up and open the door," she said.

He rolled his eyes.

"Still a swot, I see. I think you'd sacrifice me to some dark god to get in here."

"Don't give me ideas."

He snorted, and the door swung open to reveal a dream. She'd never seen anything like it, not even Hogwarts—much grander than the image he'd shown her. The room was the size of a normal ballroom, with floor to ceiling bookshelves, filled to bursting with old and new tomes.

"Are they alphabetical?" she asked, sounding breathless.

"By author. They are also sectioned out by genre." He walked into the room behind her, eyes on her face. "Though you can organise it in any way you'd like."

She couldn't contain her shock.

"You'd let me *organise* your library?"

"Granger, this is *your* library now." He couldn't seem to tear his eyes from her face as she glanced around in awe.

She thought of her tiny, treasured library under her floorboards and the mini one in the treehouse that had been taken away by Titus.

And now, if Draco was to be believed, the entire library—thousands of books—were all hers. Could a person experience an orgasm without sex? Because she stifled a moan at the back of her throat.

"Mine?" In pure euphoria, she outstretched her arms and twirled, almost crashing into a chair. "I don't even know where to start."

He placed both hands behind his back and shifted his weight. A pleased expression broke through his stern countenance.

"How about you start with the thing you've wanted to learn about the most. The thing you've been denied for years." He gave a nod. "I'll get out of your way."

She already knew what it would be.

When Malfoy left, proving that what he said wasn't some cruel trick—he was truly going to let her read *anything* she wanted—she flicked her wand up and said the spell to find books in the stacks.

"Wandless magic." Her heart had palpitations when the books she needed glowed and floated off the shelves toward her.

---

Hermione woke up hours later to Draco gently taking the book out from under her.

"It's a good thing all of our books have preservation spells. You've drooled on this one."

She wiped her mouth, feeling a bit embarrassed. She bet her face had lines from where she'd taken a nap at an awkward angle.

"Wait," she said. "Give that back. I was in the middle of—"

"You haven't eaten since breakfast. Minty spent all day preparing dinner. I think—" he looked at the title. "The Fifteen Expressions of Magic can wait for a few hours at least. Your exhausted brain can thank me later."

"My brain is doing just fine, thank you very much. Though I suppose I could use some sustenance before another round."

He set the book down on the old table. "Zavilda's book is much better than this garbage. You shouldn't waste your time."

She tugged back her head and frowned.

"That's preposterous. Zavilda completely ignores the fact that different cultures use various wand cores. His theories are flawed by his bias."

"I'm sure you've already thought of an essay to go with your opinion."

"It wouldn't be hard to create one."

"And I suppose you're going to lecture me the whole way to the dining room."

"Well, if you've come to the conclusion that Zavilda is better than Merridan, then I must help reeducate you."

As she walked through the corridors, expounding on Zavilda's faults and Merridan's genius, she thought she might have seen him hide a grin. For a moment, she wondered if he really believed his stance at all, or if he'd just wanted to hear her argue hers.

---

In the middle of lifting a bite of fish into his mouth, Draco paused, looked at the door, and frowned.

"What?" Hermione asked. She set her fork down.

Draco set his down too, sat back, and looked at her for a long minute.

"We have a guest— an unwelcome one." The Malfoys had advanced wards, so he already knew who it was, and he wasn't happy about it. "I'd ask you to stay seated while I deal with it, but I assume you'll be stubborn, leaving me with no choice but to let you follow me."

"Yes, of course."

Draco sighed but looked resigned and stood, setting his napkin down on the table.

"Very well," he said. "Though I doubt you'll be happy about it either."

---

The walk to the main sitting room didn't take long, since it was next to the dining room.

When she entered through the ornate French doors, Hermione almost toppled over in shock.

Titus stood there, waiting inside the boundary spell around the fireplace for unsolicited guests. She'd never seen him so unkempt. Dark circles smudged under his eyes. Eyes bloodshot. It looked as if he hadn't slept in years. Hair mussed, though it seemed as if he'd attempted to brush it.

Blue eyes flicked to her once, going from her head to her feet in a quick sweep, as if to look for injuries. A wince betrayed him, before he smoothed his features out.

After his inspection, he set his eyes on Draco, who didn't bother to hide his disdain.

"To what do I owe the *displeasure* of your presence in my family home?"

To the outside perspective, Titus must seem calm and collected, but Hermione knew him more than anyone. His fist kept clenching at his side, and his eyes narrowed. He was distressed. It made her heart beat hard in her chest, hating the new distance between them.

She wished to explain her choice. How she couldn't bear to be caged like she had been any longer. How, so far, Draco had let her do as she wished, and that it hadn't been a lie. How Titus letting her be a part of the ritual, *knowing* what would happen, broke her heart in irreparable ways.

Despite all that, against all logic, she still loved him. And seeing him in any kind of distress made her almost ill, knowing nothing she could say or do would make it better.

"I have a proposition," Titus said finally.

Draco's entire demeanour reeked of hostility. From this angle, she could see the man he could be to others. A cruelty rested behind his eyes. He didn't bring it out around her, but she knew he was capable of ruthless things.

"Sit down, and we'll discuss it as gentlemen." Draco motioned toward the couches, and the boundary spell vanished. "Mipsy!"

The little elf popped into view, wiggling her ears.

"Yes, Master Draco?"

"Bring us some tea."

When Mipsy left, both the men went to the couches that faced each other. They were a delicate yellow shiny fabric that looked as if it would rip and soil with the slightest touch.

The elves must have a hard time cleaning them.

The men took their seats opposite one another, both with backs ramrod straight, as if loosening their postures would signal weakness.

Not feeling comfortable enough to sit, Hermione stood behind Draco's couch. The back rose up in a delicate curve with a wooden edge. She rested a hand on it, trying to find balance, mentally and physically. Seeing Titus again threw off her equilibrium.

After his initial inspection, Titus kept his eyes on Draco, for which she was grateful, because she didn't know if she could stand the questions and accusations and apologies in his gaze.

Mipsy arrived with tea. Titus thanked the elf, but didn't drink it, holding it in his lap. Neither man spoke while trying to silently intimidate the other.

"What's your price?" Titus asked finally after a stare down.

"Pardon?" Draco's lips tugged up in a cruel grin.

"I'll give you anything."

"*Anything?*" Draco drawled, sounding like his father. As if he was a cat with a mouse. "That's a dangerous, open-ended offer. And for what are you willing to give anything?"

Titus clenched his jaw. She saw the ripple of the movement in the muscles in his neck.

"You know what I want. And I'm prepared to pay any sum you ask of me."

Titus wanted to buy her. She shouldn't be shocked, but her mouth hung open. It was a clever idea, she realised, because by doing this, he wasn't attempting to sway her choice—he was swaying Draco's.

"You'd give me your vaults?" Draco asked, raising an eyebrow.

Titus hesitated, but gave a single, severe nod.

"I make more than enough to keep us in a similar style of wealth."

"And what if I asked for your manor?"

"There are other Nott properties I can relocate to."

Draco relaxed, but Hermione knew it was just a ploy. The games they played right now were deadly serious.

"It's unfortunate for you that I don't need vaults or a manor."

Titus narrowed his eyes further. Surely, he must have known that would be Draco's response, so that wasn't the end deal. Like any good bargainer, Titus started small.

"I'd be willing to do... other things. Political things. Surely, there are people you'd like to eliminate without repercussions."

A painful silence followed, filled with horrible implications.

"Oh, there are quite a few people I'd like to eliminate." Draco glanced at his nails in a nonchalant fashion, as if to check for non-existent dirt. He set down his hand and straightened again, showing interest. "So you'd be willing to kill off anyone I'd like? What if I told you that I'd like a seat on the Wizengamot?"

"I'd ask you which seat looked the most comfortable." Titus' whole body looked like stone, unmoving. She didn't even think he was breathing.

Draco grinned, as if intrigued. Hermione hesitated. She didn't know Malfoy well enough to see if he was joking or truly considering it.

"How deliciously corrupt you are, Nott. And here I thought you were the knight of wizarding Britain, saving us from the evil terrorists." Sarcasm dripped from him like venom.

Again, Titus betrayed himself by thinning his lips. What Draco said got under his skin.

"Only for her. Do you accept the deal or not? A favour for Hermione... anything you'd like."

"If only my father wouldn't object," Draco pretended to pout. "He wants an heir *so* badly."

Titus seemed to have trouble composing himself.

"I— understand," he bit out. "I'm willing to wait until she's given you one, along with the condition that she gets access to the child as its mother, of course."

Her heart spasmed at the thought. Did Titus just expect her to get pregnant, give birth, and then leave the baby behind? She didn't wish to be a mother, but she already knew that she'd set fire to the world if anyone ever thought of separating her from her baby.

"And what if I want two? An heir and a spare?"

Titus closed his eyes briefly.

"Then I'd ask that you let her live with me while she's producing them for you."

Producing them? As if she was just growing vegetables to give away. Hermione bit her cheek to keep from saying anything. She glared at Titus, but he still refused to look at her.

"Hm, that sounds like a decent offer." Draco grinned. Hermione dug her fingers into the wooden edge of the couch so she didn't reach out and strangle him. Why did she choose such a prat again?

"It absolutely is *not* a decent offer," she couldn't stop herself from adding.



"No, it's a solid offer," Draco said. "Just think, I could stop by anytime I fancy and shag you silly until you're round with my child. Tell me, Titus, where is the best place for a good fuck in your manor? I think I'd like to bend her over the kitchen counters once. Or maybe you'd be amenable and let us use the master bath? Or possibly your own bed? Yes, I think I'd enjoy filling her cunt where you sleep."

The teacup shattered in Titus' hand, liquid spraying everywhere. He trembled a moment, before he looked down at his hand, as if hating he showed any emotion. A quick flick of his wand and the teacup reassembled in his lap, including the liquid.

"You will talk about Hermione with respect," Titus said.

"Respect? Is that what you're offering her?" Draco crossed his legs, letting one ankle rest on the opposite knee, and leaning back with confidence. "The answer to your proposition is a resounding no. If it was up to me, I'd never let her see you again. There's nothing you could offer that could compel me to part with her."

Titus' face shuttered. It reminded her of the time when he tortured Blaise, as if putting on his Death Eater mask. The darkness inside his expression made her soul shiver in dread.

"I thought it *was* up to you." Titus cocked his head. "Perhaps it's not. Your father is the true head of the family. I think I'll give him the same offer. For years, he's wanted more leverage over me. *And* he'd still get his heirs in the process. Like you said, it's a solid offer."

At the mention of his father, she thought she might have seen a small crack in Draco's façade.

"My father doesn't make decisions for me." Draco set his teacup down on the low table between them. "You see, unlike you, I'm not a controlling arse. Hermione can go wherever she wants. I've given her no restrictions. She could go home with you right now of her own volition." Draco leaned forward as if to tell a secret. "But the cold truth—the truth that will haunt you the most—is that she *won't*. Because Hermione *chose* me. And I'm going to make sure that decision remains unchanged."

The words settled like the ash after a volcano, incinerating things as it landed around them. Titus broke composure and snapped his eyes to her, half pleading, half accusing

Hermione couldn't stand it any more. The rage she suppressed so long boiled up inside her. It must have been brewing for half her life, and it hurt her chest keeping it inside. If she stayed one more second in the room, she'd murder someone. Instead of violence, she twisted and walked out, fed up with everyone.

"Sprite—" Titus called. She ignored him, slamming the French doors behind her. Instead of leaving, she pressed herself against the wall, close enough to listen in, hand to her chest, trying to slow her heartbeat.

"You're going to fuck up, Malfoy," she heard Titus say in a threatening tone a little after she'd left. "You can't help yourself. You're too much of an arrogant little prick, thinking you can do whatever you want without repercussions."

"Well, if that's all, Nott, then I think I'll get back to Hermione while I can." She heard fabric rustling and assumed they both stood up. "Tonight, when you're in bed getting your cock sucked by some whore, crying pathetically while imagining the taste of her cunt, just know that I'm thoroughly enjoying everything you've dreamed about."

The silence felt more violent than war.

"I don't have to imagine her taste."

"Is that so?" Draco gave a harsh laugh. "Well, I've touched her intimately several times too, long before the ritual. I didn't even have to talk her into it like you probably did. She makes the most delectable noises when she cums, doesn't she?"

There was a long silence as Titus comprehended what Draco told him. That it hadn't been just a kiss. A part of him probably suspected it. Her fingers shook, angry at the revelation.

"One day, I'm going to hold your severed head in my hands."

"What's with you and severed heads? You're starting to become a cliché. Get back to me when you make an original threat, and then *maybe* I'll shiver in my boots." Draco's voice didn't hide his disdain. "Get out of my manor, Nott, and don't ever step inside my wards again, or I'll take *your* head. Oh, and this is yours." He threw something that jangled as it landed. "The blood money I owe you. Thanks for raising her."

"You can keep your fucking money. In the future, just remember that I attempted to be civil. You'll regret making me your enemy."

She heard Titus step away, toward the floo. Heard him grab at the floo powder on the mantle.

"Hermione wants her wand back," Draco added on. "Along with all of her things."

"If she wants her things, then she knows exactly where to find them."

The pop of the floo sounded as Titus left Malfoy manor.

Hermione breathed heavily against the wall, her anger growing as she waited.

The rattle of the French doors signalled Draco's exit as he stepped through. Hermione wasted no time and pushed at his shoulders as hard as she could. He stumbled and righted himself, blinking a few times in confusion.

"What the fuck, Granger?"

"You're exactly like him! I really thought you might be different, but I was wrong."

He curled his lips in a sneer. She attempted to push him again, but he grabbed her wrists and shoved her against the wall, while she began to struggle. If she could, she'd punch him in the nose. Her rage was so great that she forgot to use magic, responding like a feral beast.

"I'll try to ignore that you went psychotic for a moment. I honestly don't understand what you're mad at *me* for."

"You told him about us— in the glade. That was supposed to be a secret."

"Why does it matter if he knows?"

Hermione kicked at his leg, so angry she could scream. Something in her brain felt close to snapping. Her trauma was hardening into something savage.

"I'm not some— some competition to see who's the best. I'm more than something to brag about."

He pulled his head back, sneer deepening.

"You're mental. He was trying to buy you, Granger!" He leaned forward, their lips only centimetres apart. She didn't know if she wanted to kiss him or claw off his face.

"Maybe you should have sold me." She sneered back. "After all, you certainly enjoyed yourself at the end, gloating about having me and touching me as if I'm an—" she searched for the word, spitting mad. "An object! If I'm just that to you, then you might as well sell me for the highest price."

He grabbed the bottom of her chin in a firm hold, fingers pressed into her cheeks. "I anticipated you'd be infuriating, but you're exceeding expectations." His eyes locked on her lips, as if he wanted to bite at them. Then he sighed and let her go. She sagged against the wall. "Give me a month to prove you wrong. If at the end, you still want the Butcher, then you'll be free to go back to your old cage and lock yourself inside forever. I'm not going to stop you. But— fuck, never mind. Goodnight, Granger."

He frowned at her, as if disgusted, and then he turned and left, stomping off down the corridor, leaving her alone in an unfamiliar place. She slid down the wall, placing her head in her hands, and trembled.

She glanced around at the cold decorations. The beauty of Malfoy manor resembled a knife, with an edge sharp enough to cut. Nothing out of place. Nothing imperfect.

Hermione didn't think she could ever consider it her own.

Not for the first time did she wonder if she should have chosen her old home, where she at least knew what to expect.

## Chapter End Notes

Song Suggestion: Maxence Cyrin- "Where is My Mind" (The Pixies Piano cover) AND Tamino- "Habibi" I couldn't choose.



# Chapter 29: Say My Name

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Year & Years- "Take Shelter"

PurpleLicorice wrote a one-shot from Theo's pov, visiting Titus after the Trials are over. It's linked to this story below.

Thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for editing!

Cabrlita10 drew a sweet image of young Hermione with Hopper. I put it at the bottom of chapter 2.

A small edit: at the end of the last chapter, Hermione wasn't confused about her choice between the men. By that point, she was angry with both. Our girl was homesick for Nott manor. I went ahead and edited the last line to better reflect what I had intended.

Important info: purebloods can't have babies with muggles either. Muggles can have babies with other muggles though. The history/ logistics of the curse will be detailed later. Promise.

## Say My Name

Hermione avoided Draco for two days, though she suspected he was avoiding her too. They still ate dinner together. She caught his stare over his pumpkin soup, and when he looked away, she attempted to catch glimpses of him in between bites. Besides those few stolen moments, heavy with unsaid things, he left her alone.

In her free time, she explored the manor, wishing to talk to someone. During her investigation, she found a room filled with old busts of the family. One of them—Septimus Malfoy— liked to tell her stories of his youth, so she spent hours listening to him talk about hunting magical creatures and riding dragons.

Besides that, monotony already crept toward her. The grounds were too manicured, the decor too stark. She feared she'd cut her finger on the edge of perfection. Nott manor had a wild quality to it: creaking suits of armour, heavy fabrics, deep colours that felt like a hug. In contrast, Malfoy manor was beautiful, but impersonal. Hermione was nervous to touch anything, lest it break or move out of place.

During the third day, she grew bored and decided to study different runic languages in the library. Halfway through her second book, she looked up to see Draco entering with a scroll under his arm. He sat across from her, without even a hello, engrossed in his own research.

They studied that way for hours, silent but together, until he got up.

"Malfoy," she said, not wanting him to leave.

"Yes?" He stiffened, without turning.

Even though her feelings were still confused, Hermione decided to extend an olive branch.

"Can you show me around the manor? There are several places still locked to me."

His shoulders hunched forward, as if releasing some tension.

He still would not look at her. "What would you like to see first?"

---

The greenhouse was humid—the perfect temperature for the plants to thrive. Misting charms watered the plants to their specific requirements. The elves helped maintain it a bit, but most of it was self-sufficient.

She touched a yellow Sunrise flower, avoiding the dusting of pollen. It bloomed when her fingers stroked the yellow petal, happy with her attention. If she wished, she could ingest the white dust clinging to it. It caused a false happiness, slightly less effective than a calming draught. If taken in large quantities, it could create a hallucinogenic state. Ancient wizards used to use the pollen in their rituals, thinking it caused them to tap into seer blood.

Malfoy stepped up behind her. The heat of his body ghosted along her back as he reached out and stroked the petals like she did, letting his fingers linger alongside hers. Hermione didn't breathe or move, except to drop her hand to the wood of the table where the plants were arranged, pressing her nails into the rough surface.

"I'm sorry, Granger," he whispered in her ear. Draco's voice always sounded like lust—a dangerous lure that Hermione needed to ignore. At least until she understood it more. She was awkward in his presence now. Something in their dynamic had shifted, and it set her nerves on edge.

"What for, exactly?"

"You're going to make me say it again, aren't you?"

Her lips twitched.

"Possibly three times."

He drummed his fingers right next to her hand, as if agitated—as if he'd never had to apologise before. "I shouldn't have boasted. Those moments were ours. You trusted me with intimacy, and I broke that trust."

Hermione clenched her hands on the board. Any harder and she might get splinters. Why did the apology make her heart speed up? Had she accidentally breathed in the Sunrise pollen?

She waited for him to add on to it, a justification for why he did it. But it seemed his apology didn't come with excuses.

"Perhaps... I shouldn't have attempted to kick you."

He huffed out a laugh, causing some of her hair to billow.

"Feel free to give me a swift kick to the shins if I'm ever a wanker like that again. I'm—Merlin, Granger, I'm tired of pretending I don't want to spend time with you."

Her heart beat hard under her ribs. All she would have to do is lean back, and she'd be in his embrace. All she would have to do is slide her hand over and take his into her own. Instead, she gave a nod, knowing he could see it.

"What would you like to do next?" he asked.

She thought of her lonely conversations with the stone bust of Septimus Malfoy.

"Could I see Theo?"

He hesitated.

"It's tradition for us to be relatively alone for a month. It's to ensure you're more... settled. Breaking that might result in some consequences, but I'm okay with the risk if that's what you desire."

"But Titus—"

"Titus is a mediator, and he attended both the Trials and the ritual. He's not included in the rule."

She thought about it, once again feeling tense, reminded of the things that hurt her. Draco left the decision in her hands. It only took a moment for her to make her choice. In the end, she didn't want a reason to be taken away. She still missed her old home, missed Tabitha and the elves. Malfoy manor was cold, void of anything soft, but the more time that passed, the more she found her footing.

She didn't want to go backward, even though marching forward was proving new and scary.

"No," she said. "I don't want to risk it. I can wait a month."

His breath tickled her neck. She thought his mouth might be close to her skin.

"I think I know a solution. It's still a risk, but less traceable. Do you want to go to Diagon Alley? We can't host any visitors at the manor that you knew while growing up, but we can venture out if you stay close and don't speak to anyone."

Her soul flooded with an odd emotion. Not quite happy. Not quite a relief. She tempered it the best she could, wary of trusting him.

But still, her insides leapt in excitement.

"I'd love some ice cream."

"I plan to give you more than that."

He touched the petal again, dragging his finger along the pollen— a miniscule amount. Then he placed it on his lips, letting his tongue linger against the powder. He gave a low groan that went to her stomach.

"Have you ever tried Sunrise powder, Granger?"

She shook her head. Titus never kept plants like these.

"Do you want to?" He placed his finger—the one he licked— in front of her lips as an invitation.

She didn't ponder long. She's always been curious about what it would feel like.

She flicked her tongue on the remaining yellow pollen, tasting him in the process.

It only took a second before her body loosened the tension she'd been carrying. It was the feeling after a good exercise, endorphins bursting through her.

"Let's enjoy our day," he whispered, voice ragged.

---

Hermione always liked the menagerie in Diagon Alley. Though it smelled terrible, a mixture of a musky scent and animal excrement, it exploded with life in every corner. Fire crabs and sleek black rats in cages next to adorable puffskeins. Cats of every colour took up one wall, including one that looked like Crookshanks.

Hermione wandered the aisle, attempting to ignore the cats. Per tradition, Titus needed to transfer her belongings to Malfoy manor, but, as of yet, nothing had arrived.

Not even her cat.

She missed Crookshanks the most at night. Malfoy's bed proved comfortable, but empty. She didn't have Hopper to soothe her. Each day without her comfort items built her anger.

Hermione suspected Titus wanted to force some sort of confrontation with her, one on one.

"What about this one?" Draco pointed to a tawny owl that preened its feathers. Like in the greenhouse, his body heat almost pressed to her back.

"No." Next to the tawny owl, a scraggly grey one glared at her. It stood half the size of the others with some of its feathers plucked out. The note on the front stated he liked to nip, and he'd been at the shop for four months. Her heart went out to the ugly creature. "This one."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I'm trying not to judge your choice... but it's the worst one."



"I have a soft spot for unfortunate looking creatures."

"Bad news for me, then."

Hermione rolled her eyes and stepped away.

"I fear the manor will soon become home to every hideous stray that tugs on your heart," he said.

"It's not like you don't have the room. I could potentially fit a zoo next to the greenhouse."

He gave an exaggerated frown of disgust at her suggestion.

The transaction went fast and before long, Hermione was the proud owner of an owl.

"You can owl Theo when you want now," Draco told her as they exited the shop. "What will you name it?"

Hermione thought back to her muggle books. There was one about ancient mythology that had fascinated her.

"Hermes."

"The Greek messenger god?" Draco asked. "Sorry, but I don't think he looks very regal. Maybe something like Gorgon might be better."

Hermione halted and blinked a few times. The cage floating behind her stalled with her stop.

"How do you know about Greek gods?"

Wizarding history had similarities to muggles, but different lore. It wasn't until she'd read both histories that she realised many of the muggle "gods" were just powerful wizards of the time, just with different names. For instance, Persephone kept her original translation of Kore — the daughter of a powerful witch in Ancient Greece who'd mastered elemental magic.

But Draco knew the *muggle* name.

"I own several muggle books. If you want, I can lend you a few when we return."

"I mean—*why* would you read it?"

Hermione found it hard to imagine pureblood prince Draco Malfoy reading a book written by someone not a wizard. Titus would never allow something so purely muggle in his home.

He only shrugged. She tried to look in his eyes, but he shifted them everywhere but on her. "Their books and most of their technology are illegal, but for the right price, anything can be bought on the black market. I have other muggle things as well. Do you want to see them?"

Hermione hesitated. They hadn't spent much time together. She felt wary around him, but he didn't intrude on her, as if knowing she needed some space to get used to her new

environment. It felt like another extended olive branch.

"Yes," she said.

He held out his hand, and she stared at it.

"It won't bite, Granger."

She nodded and allowed the contact. His hand tightened on hers as he led her away to the formal apparition point.

---

In the middle of the manor, Draco opened a door to reveal a room filled with giant overstuffed chairs. An odd blank canvas took up the opposite wall.

"What is it?" She didn't want to disappoint him, but the room underwhelmed her.

"Take a seat."

Hermione hesitated, but she did as he asked and sank into the leather chair.

He went behind her, messing with some device he said was muggle.

She heard it click and a light projected onto the canvas.

"Does your father know this is here?"

It didn't seem like something Lucius would approve of.

"He knows I've built it, but he doesn't ever tell me no. Though he thinks I'm a deviant and is secretly worried about my behaviour, afraid someone will find out in larger circles." He gave a smirk, as if the thought amused him.

"Are you sure there's no magic?"

"I'm sure," he said. "The things I've discovered that muggles can do almost rival our own inventions. They used to have things called planes. The muggles sat inside them as they flew like birds. No magic at all. I'm told they still use them in other areas of the world."

She'd heard of aeroplanes in the physics books she'd read, though she'd never seen one. They required a scientific formula to take flight, though she didn't understand it.

"This looks like a television."

"It is." He sat in the chair next to her. "A large one. Before the curse, muggles used to go to something called the theatre where they'd eat snacks and watch their movies. Wizards have stolen their technology, but they don't understand its potential. The muggles created all kinds of interesting stories."

He flicked off the light with his wand, just as an image projected on the screen. She gasped, looking at an image of outer space, decorated with stars. Yellow words scrolled along that she struggled to understand.

"Is that the universe? How did they get the photos?"

"Not ours. None of this is real. It's a pretend world that even has its own magic system. It might be my favourite muggle movie so far."

Hermione watched with her mouth open. Mipsy brought popcorn and butterbeer during the middle, but Hermione barely ate it, so in awe at what she was seeing. It reminded her of a book, a painting, and a play all mixed together, but so much better.

And in the back of her mind, she thought it felt familiar. A distant dream from her past.

Draco didn't pay attention to the movie. Most of the time, she felt his eyes on her, watching every little reaction.

When the final fight began, Hermione reached out and grabbed Draco's upper arm, squeezing the tight muscles until the resistance managed to win. The elation that filled her at the end made her whole body feel alive with excitement.

She turned to Draco when the show ended, the picture changing into a list of names.

"That was amazing," she said, hands still on his shoulder. "I think I might watch it every day for the rest of my life."

He looked at her hand on him, and it reminded her to release him.

"But you haven't even seen the sequel."

"A sequel! There's more?"

He gave a little laugh.

"It's a trilogy," he said. "But I have hundreds of movies, Granger. We could watch a new one every day."

Hundreds. It was like he opened another library.

She nearly jumped out of her seat.

"Right now," she demanded. "I have to know what happens next."

Draco's eyes flicked over her. Something behind his expression softened, as if falling. His hand reached up and slid along her jaw, eyes on her lips. He tugged her forward, but right before they could kiss, she jerked back. A flash of something crossed his face, maybe frustration or resignation. She found it impossible to decode what he really thought.

Frustration filled her too. She *wanted* to kiss him with the same abandon she used to— an experiment, for fun. Even now, her lips tingled with the unfulfilled promise. It left her aching and breathless. Her body desired it, but her mind resisted. It felt injured, like it remembered touching a hot stove.

"I'm sorry," she said.

This time she clearly saw the anger. He grit his teeth and grabbed her face again, much rougher than before, once again tugging her close.

"Don't apologise to me ever again. Not for that. I'd rather you pull away from my affections than give in to me as a lie. Do you understand?"

She gave a hard nod.

"Now," he continued, voice softening. "Let's watch the second in the series. It has a twist you won't believe."

Draco stood up and put the second movie in, and when he went back to the seat, turning the lights back off and sinking into the depths of his chair, he placed his hand on the armrest palm up.

He waited for her response. She could deny him this if she wanted.

But she needed touch—touch separated from anything sexual. She desired nothing more than to be assured the world was still gentle. Maybe he understood that. Maybe he needed touch too. Maybe what he wanted from her was deeper than nights and pleasure. She thought it might be just the simple touch of hand to hand.

She could do that.

Hermione reached out and gently rested her hand in his. His lip tilted up as the familiar yellow words scrolled past the stars. He didn't look at her this time, but his hand tightened.

---

The cauldron bubbled in front of her, looking close to the final stage of brewing. Ten other cauldrons bubbled beside it, all at different levels of completion.

A long table rested in the center, and along several wide shelves a wide variety of potion ingredients were displayed, some of them quite rare. The room itself looked meticulously clean, yet plants dangled in the corners and notes were pinned everywhere.

It impressed Hermione. She placed her hand on the edge of the rough hewn table.

"Like it?" Draco asked, seeming at home in the environment in a way she hadn't seen elsewhere. This was his true office. Instead of a desk, he had a potions table, and instead of quills, he had various knives.

"Why potions?" she asked.

After Hogwarts, he'd entered an internship under the tutelage of the top potions master in England, creating potions for apothecaries across the country. At the moment, he still was in the midst of it, though he'd been given creative freedom.

"I like precision. A little more or less of an ingredient turns the potion into something else. The best part is the creation of something new. My godfather excelled at this. After knowing I wanted to enter into potions, he helped tutor me on the weekends at Hogwarts. He taught me all he knew and more."

Snape— his godfather. She didn't have the same warm feelings toward him as Draco did, so she held her tongue.

He walked over to an empty cauldron.

"This is yours," he said. "I can buy whatever size you need, and you can use whatever tools or ingredients you wish."

Hermione nodded. It still felt odd to not have any rules, to be allowed to do whatever she wanted. She thought at any moment he'd tug it all back with a cruel laugh. It felt like she was doing something wrong, breaking some rule, even with permission.

She stared at Draco, perhaps too long. There was a subtle shift of his feet that made her think he might be nervous. Maybe anxious for her approval. She didn't know how to respond to it, not knowing if this was some long, elaborate trick that would wound her later.

"Thank you," she said.

He sneered lightly.

"Granger, I don't need your—"

He stopped abruptly. And his sneer grew into something so severe not even occlumency would help hide it.

"Fuck."

"What's wrong?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned.

"My father is here."

---

The formal Malfoy dining room was darker than other areas of the home. A long ebony table stretched from one end to the other, built in the old style. A relic from hundreds of years ago. Hermione wondered who had eaten at it over the ages. Dignitaries and royalty? Famed wizards and other important figures? She'd heard a rumour that one of the Malfoy ancestors courted a famous muggle queen named Elizabeth.

Unlike the rest of the manor, nothing modern rested in the room.

Hermione sliced into the lamb shanks with delicate strokes of her knife as the meal progressed in silence.

Lucius kept his hard eyes on her movements as if looking for faults. Despite all her courage, the sight of Lucius always gave her a low sense of dread, the source of her nightmares. Every nerve stood on end, instincts screaming. Despite scheming to get her for Draco, Hermione had a sixth sense that the Malfoy patriarch hated her.

The silence proved long-lasting and painful. Draco and his father played some quiet game that didn't involve her, communicating in a way she didn't understand. A small grimace. A narrowing of the eyes. A scrape of a fork against porcelain. A clearing of the throat.

Finally, Lucius set his fork down. He took a small sip of wine, glaring at her over the goblet, as if somehow she manifested as the source of whatever conflict had arisen between father and son.

"I trust you are settling in well?" he asked her.

"Father—"

"Draco, I am merely expressing my concern for your breeder's well being." He glanced at her plate, which she'd barely touched. "You need to eat more meat. The baby will need the iron."

"I'm not hungry," she answered, hand tightening on her knife.

"Father—" he stated again, this time in a lower voice.

"Becoming anaemic will benefit no one." His upper lip curled. "From what I've heard, this particular muggleborn can be... obstinate. I just wanted her to know that the Malfoy household will not allow willful behaviour. Her days of being coddled and spoiled by Nott are over."

"Her name is Hermione. You will not address her as anything else."

Lucius looked over Draco with a small sneer.

"I see my lessons have not taken root as I'd intended," His eyes hardened and then smoothed out. "I guess it matters not as long as the result is the same."

He patted his lips with a napkin and then stood abruptly. Draco followed his movements with his own glare.

"You promised not to interfere," Draco said.

"I'm merely visiting my only son. Is that not allowed?"

"You'll be lucky to have a decent conversation with me ever again."

Lucius allowed the silence to hurt until he spoke.

"What do you think would have happened had you attempted to pull one of your schemes *unsuccessfully*?"

"I—"

"Not only would your muggleborn have been taken from you, but you would have been in chains. So I think this behaviour toward me is rather... ungrateful. Haven't I made sure to give you everything you've needed?"

Draco threw his napkin on the table.

"I've lost my appetite."

"Titus visited me," Lucius said, causing Draco to stop. His whole chest rose with a deep breath, as if to regain control. "He offered me the same thing he offered you."

"And?"

"And I feel it imperative to warn you that he's dangerous."

"I'm not an idiot."

"I'm beginning to doubt that."

"Your confidence in your only son's intelligence is heartwarming." Draco straightened his robes. "Titus isn't that hard to figure out. Now, if that's all, I'd like for you to leave us be."

Lucius worked his jaw. He grabbed his cane, and let it smack against the tile below.

"Titus is not to be underestimated. He may not break rules in the normal way, but he will when he can, and he'll create the loopholes to do so. He's waiting for an opening to strike, so it leaves us no time to accomplish our objective."

"Stop with the convoluted riddles, father. Just say what you've come to say."

Lucius's eyes flicked to her. Despite working to get her, she had a sense that under it all she didn't measure up in his eyes.

"You may have a year by ministry standards to get her pregnant, but my time limit is much shorter." He clicked his cane again. "I'll give you six months, Draco, and then I expect her to be gestating, preferably with a male."

"And if it's a girl?" Draco asked, dripping with sarcasm.

"Then we cut our losses."

"I'm not following."

Lucius adjusted his stance, taking a moment to answer.

"I will not have my family destroyed for a single muggleborn. There are other women, Draco. If your breeder gives you a son, then I'll allow you to marry, if you wish. Or perhaps have a live-in mistress. But Hermione's not your bride, and she never will be. Treating her as such will be a misstep. No son of mine will behave like the Rowle heir, pretending his breeder is his little wife. It's shameful behaviour."

Her heart stuttered with an odd pain, as if she'd been slapped. She'd never seen Draco stiffen the way he did, every muscle locking up.

"Get out," he seethed.

"Listen to reason, son," he said. "Nott is bonded to the girl, and her absence has made him—unstable. He's grown too powerful to easily bribe or threaten. There's no telling what he'll do. I do not warn of this lightly. There are very few people I'd concede a loss to, but it's imperative we smooth tensions, especially as the Order is gaining strength. Two great houses warring would do nothing but weaken wizarding society. A promise to give back the girl after we gain an heir might soothe him enough that he doesn't retaliate."

Draco drew his wand and pointed it at his father.

"She's mine. And if anyone dares attempt to take her from me, I'd make the Butcher look sane. I'm finished with this discussion. I believe it's time for you to leave."

"Son... she isn't Deanna."

"Out!"

Deanna? Hermione wondered who they talked about. Whoever it was, it struck a nerve with Draco.

Lucius eyed the wand. If he felt surprised, he didn't show it. Somehow, he even managed to look bored, though Hermione knew Lucius was just as good at occluding as his son.

"We'll have this discussion another time."

"We will not."

"Since your birth, everything I've ever done has been for your future, and this is what I get? A wand pointed at me. Going to curse your sire?" He paused. "Tell me, have you ever seen Titus torture someone?" He waited, but he got no answer. "He's a master— an artist. Skinning people alive. Ripping off limbs. It's a slow and agonising process, done with precision. With blood replenishing potions and stasis spells, he keeps them alive in horrific states until they tell him everything he wants to know. Now... imagine what he'd do to someone he considers an enemy."

With that final note, Lucius gave one more sneer, turned and walked out of the dining room to the floo, cane clicking against the floor. When the sound faded, Draco sat back down, pocketing his wand.



"I'm sorry you had to hear that," Draco said. There was nothing else to add on. They both knew the threat was real. To say not to worry would be disingenuous. "I'm not making you get pregnant in six months unless you want to. My father can fuck off. In the end, he doesn't have the power to give you back. Only I do, and I refuse. If Titus attempts to take you, I'll consider it an act of war."

---

After getting ready for bed, Mipsy popped into her room with something bundled in her hand.

"Mipsy has something for Mistress Hermione." She handed it to her.

Hermione took it and unravelled the white cloth to find the universe necklace nestled inside.

"Thank you, Mipsy."

The little elf nodded and popped away, leaving Hermione to stare at the object that once meant so much to her. If she concentrated, she could still feel it wrapped along her throat. She'd never been without it since Titus had given it to her. There was a time she thought she'd like to wear it forever, a reminder of his love.

Instead of placing it back on her neck, Hermione wrapped it back up in the white cloth and walked to her dresser, setting it inside an empty drawer.

Though she was still confused about Draco, the thought of going back to Nott manor had never felt so dark. For the first time in her life, she experienced what it felt like to exist with the potential for more.

Taking a deep breath, she shut the drawer.

Titus had promised her the universe, but the universe was larger than Nott manor. Larger than Titus himself. He couldn't give her the stars, no matter how much he wished to.

Because they couldn't be contained.

They couldn't be owned or gifted.

The stars were indomitable.

---

Two nights later, she'd been at a new vanity in his bedroom, braiding her hair before bed, when Draco waltzed in without announcement. She stopped and set down her comb.

He walked to a table near the fireplace with a familiar box under his arm and unfurled the contents, setting up a chess game. Throughout the entire thing, he didn't say a single word.

"I'm not sure I remember agreeing to a game of chess," she said.

He paused his set up, holding a queen in his hand.

"Didn't I tell you years ago that I'd win you, just so I could play a good game of chess? In this one thing, you have no choice."

Hermione rolled her eyes, remembering his selfish childhood demand for a friend.

She got up and walked over, sitting across from him.

"Are you ready to weep with your loss?" Draco asked.

"I don't cry."

Malfoy made the first move, sliding a piece across the board. Hermione had always liked the sound.

"That's impossible."

Hermione shrugged.

"I haven't since I was a child." She made her decision, sliding her own piece. He studied her move as if wondering what strategy she played at. "It's odd, because I sometimes want to, but instead everything inside me freezes and empties. Perhaps something's broken in me."

"You're not broken. You're surviving."

Hermione swallowed hard, liking the way the words made her feel. She'd always been treated like glass, close to shattering if pressed too hard. But despite Draco's hard edges, he never treated her like she was too fragile to knock against them. He told her the truth, no matter how unpleasant. The inherent choice he'd given her with wine showed he thought her strong enough to make it.

"So—" Hermione attempted to find another conversation topic. "Who is Deanna?"

Draco didn't have his occlumency shields up, so his sudden flinch wasn't hidden. He'd had his finger on top of a pawn, but he lifted it and sat back.

"It's not a happy story."

Hermione considered the warning, knowing that shared trauma could sometimes be a weight. But she wanted to understand Draco better.

"I'd like to know, but you don't have to tell me."

He stared off into the fire. "A few months before Theo's party, father won a breeder."

Hermione gasped in shock. She'd been slouching in her chair, but at the revelation she straightened.

"What happened to her?"

Lucius didn't have a breeder any more, and Draco didn't have siblings.

Draco grimaced, as if maybe regretting telling her. He drummed his fingers on the table a few times.

"She was an American muggleborn attending uni here when the curse happened, so she wasn't caught right away. She spent years posing as a muggle, only using magic when necessary. But... she made a mistake, and the aurors found her." Again, he grimaced. "She should have hated me. I probably would have in her position, especially since I was an absolute little shit to her at first."

"But she didn't hate you?"

He seemed to be clenching his teeth.

"Despite everything, she somehow managed to care—" He didn't finish his thought, twisting the pawn in his fingers, unwilling to look at her.

Hermione let the silence linger. Nothing felt right to say.

"What happened to her?"

"She died giving birth to my little sister. Neither of them made it."

"I'm sorry—"

He made a motion of his hand to stop, and she closed her mouth.

Her heart thumped oddly. It seemed Draco had lost two mothers. One pureblood and one muggleborn.

"She'd never been very healthy and miscarried several times," he explained. "It took years and several Ministry investigations. My father brushed off her concerns when she said she didn't think she'd survive a full-term pregnancy. I'm convinced she had a drop of seer blood."

"Did he love her?"

Draco shrugged.

"He'd never been warm with her, but I think he'd grown to appreciate her. He was searching for—I'm not sure, but he never found it. And after her death, he never attempted to get another."

She wondered how much of himself he saw in his father. Or was he more like his mother? Or maybe he was a bit like Deanna. Whoever he compared himself to, she could see he still grieved her.

"Well, I think—"

Mipsy popped into existence. Hermione withheld her flinch of surprise. The little elf was much more abrupt than Bitty.

"Master must hurry," the elf said. "There's a hunt. You're being called to service."

His whole body stiffened.

"Fuck."

She'd never seen this expression. A little like rage, a little like dread.

"Hunt?" Hermone asked, a chill crawling up her spine.

His eyes glanced up as if he'd forgotten that she was there.

"Bloody hell," he groaned and stood up. He went to his closet without answering, exiting five minutes later in a Death Eater outfit. A heavy silver mask glinted in his hand.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back later, Granger. If it's too late, don't stay up. I might be a while."

As she watched, he placed the silver mask on his face. It had intricate lines etched on the surface. Beautiful in an odd, severe way.

"No, wait," she stood up, walking toward him. "What's going on?"

He glanced down at her, eyes icy cold behind the mask.

"I'll tell you later."

Without any other explanation, he swept out of the room, cloak billowing behind him.

---

Hermione paced in the front sitting room. Back and forth, disturbed by her thoughts. She wished he'd have just told her what was going on, because she was certain her brain conjured things much worse.

Near midnight, the pop of apparition filled the room, and Draco stood in front of her.

"Finally—"

She trailed off.

Something was wrong.

He still wore his Death Eater uniform, his mask pushed aside only enough to show strands of messy platinum hair and pale skin. Blood covered him from head to toe, dripping from his silver skull mask, dripping from the hems of his robes, splattering along the pristine floor. So abundant, it wet the fabric.

"Merlin," Hermione whispered. For the first time, she was truly frightened of him.

Mipsy arrived with a tray of snacks for Hermione. But when she entered, she dropped her tray and food went everywhere.

"Master!"

"Leave," he commanded, flat, toneless. Mipsy gathered the spilled food with her elf magic and obeyed with a vanishing crack. Hermione got up to leave, thinking he meant her as well.

"Not you."

She paused.

Malfoy walked forward, and she backed away, legs almost collapsing against the couch behind her. He resembled a demonic monster, the sentient beasts of old that roamed the forests.

But then he raised his mask and she saw his red-rimmed eyes, his cheeks blotchy, his hair in disarray. It could have been from exhaustion, but she held a great suspicion it was from despair. It was so different from his normal emotionless expression, so vulnerable, that instantly she was on her feet, checking his robes, pulling the sleeves up to his shoulder, feeling the toned muscles as she went. No cuts, no bleeding. She moved to slip the robe from his shoulders to check his chest, but he stopped her, cradling her wrists in his hands.

"It's not mine."

Hermione backed away again and sat down on the couch, unsure how she felt, unsure how to react. Of course, the blood wasn't his.

Draco collapsed next to her on the couch. She stiffened when he bent over, thinking he was about to embrace her, but instead, he sat so close she felt his shuddering breath through the shoulder that touched her own. He threw the soiled mask to the ground with a low growl, and the silver skull flashed in the flickering firelight.

He shivered, closing his eyes, resting his elbows on his knees, head in hand.

"Say my name," he rasped.

"Why?"

"I need to hear it."

"Malfoy?"

"Not that one. Not my father's."

"Draco."

He pressed his eyes shut so tight it wrinkled the skin near it.

She let him sit there for a moment.

"Whose blood was that?"

He frowned.

"Do you really want the truth?"

By his tone, she knew she'd hate what she was about to hear, but she still needed to hear it.

She gave a nod, and he sighed.

"Some muggleborns had been found. Twins, a boy and girl, probably six years old. They knew the girl had magic and sources suspected the boy did too."

"What were you doing there? Isn't that an auror job?"

He sat up a little.

"The act of obtaining the information is auror work. But the subsequent hunts are compulsory for all viable wizards, especially purebloods. My father brought me to a few. However—most men only go once or twice in their lifetimes. It's rare to be called to service more than that. I'll let you guess who put in a recommendation?"

A chill crept up her spine. She didn't want to say the name out loud.

"Titus?" She finally asked.

He gave a nod.

"Nott led the mission. The whole street was annihilated."

She gasped. "Everyone?"

"Besides the children. Nott's ruthless, but—at least he leaves the little ones alone." Draco rubbed at his eyes with the palm of his hand. "Once we got to the house, the father refused to say where he hid his family. I had to— Titus tasked me with recovering information."

She understood what he really meant. Titus tasked him with torture.

Draco clenched his fist hard in his lap. Hermione slid her hand slowly and gently into his, peeling his gloved fingers back with care, until she could connect them. She ignored the blood that transferred to her skin, trying not to think of the source.

"Did you?"

He closed his eyes.

"The father didn't give away anything... no matter what I tried. But one of the little ones started crying. There ended up being four of them, hidden under the floorboards. The mother, the twins, and a toddler. Someone had done a decent concealment charm, but the silencio must have failed."

"Did you kill the father?"

"I probably should have. But no, he was arrested."

"And the mother—"

"She will be kept alive— as long as she cooperates."

"Cooperates?"

Draco gave her a strange look. His eyes looked haunted, as if he'd lived a million years and all of them had been horrific.

"She'll be transferred to a birthing house, and her husband will be sent to her once a month under threat of death until she gets pregnant again."

Years ago, she'd have been confused, but now she understood they wanted her to create more magical babies. If she produced them once, she might do it again.

"What about their toddler?"

Draco hesitated.

"The baby stays with its mother, but the authorities are... waiting. If she shows magic like they hope, then she'll be taken just like her siblings. And if the subsequent babies have magic, then the mum's life will become nothing but pregnancy, birth, and loss until she's too old."

Hermione tried to be calm, tried to show Draco that she was strong enough for the information. But she knew he felt the tremble in her hand. Would that have been the ultimate fate of her own mother? Was that why she killed herself?

"What happens to her after she can't anymore?"

He grimaced.

"Depending on how many children she gave, she'll be provided extra rations and a stipend for her service."

A stipend. Rations. The words made Hermione ill.

"How could they do this?"

Her real question centered on Titus. Despite knowing him as the Butcher, despite the betrayal, and despite seeing him behead Viktor, it was hard to imagine him as anything other than who he'd been to her. She'd always known he'd killed Order members, and she'd known he'd obtained muggleborns. But she'd imagined it differently from what Draco described.

Draco paused, as if decoding what she really meant.

"Desperation gave them a reason, but it's easier for them to do this to people who they already believed were like animals. Before the curse, purebloods—especially my father—hated muggles and muggleborns. Not just hate, they—they didn't even believe you should have been allowed to exist."

She bit her lip until it hurt. "Does Titus—think like that?"

Draco was silent for a long time.

"I don't think Titus is capable of seeing muggles as anything other than your father or the order, even the muggleborns. He hates them all."

"But I'm muggleborn, and he doesn't hate me."

Draco shook his head.

"Somehow he's been able to separate you in his mind. A new category."

"If you're so different from the rest of them, what do you see when you look at a muggle?" Her voice came out clipped.

He glared at her for a moment at the accusation, but then his eyes softened.

"I see a little girl staring at her dead father. Other times, I see a grave with fresh flowers."

Hermione blinked, feeling her eyes burn. Draco hung his head, running his bloody gloved hand over his face, leaving it streaked with crimson.

"I gave the twins their stuffed animals before being taken away," he whispered. "They'll have that, at least."

They were quiet for a very long time, just staring into the fire.

"Say my name," he asked again.

"Draco."



# Chapter 30: Benefits of the Arrangement

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Emiline– "What It Means to be a Girl" (1st half) The Weeknd- "High for this" (last half)

Thank you MyPrivateInsanity for being my ride or die!

Trigger Warning at the end

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

## Benefits of the Arrangement

A soft beat under her ear. Warmth. These were the first sensations Hermione experienced as she came to consciousness. She blinked a few times, trying to orient herself, finding herself on the couch, face pressed to Draco's chest.

As she woke up, she remembered they'd spent the previous night sitting in heavy silence, only pausing when he'd taken a break for a shower. Sensing he'd needed company, Hermione stayed with him afterward, the two of them passing back and forth a flask of the most disgusting liquor.

It must have knocked her out, because she didn't remember falling asleep.

Hermione planned to extract herself without him noticing, but his fingers dragged down her spine, showing he was awake. She tensed, but when he continued the gentle strokes, she relaxed, until Draco jolted, flinging her to the side with a shout.

"What's going on?" Hermione rubbed the sleep from her eyes, glancing up from her position on the floor to find Draco struggling with something furry and orange attached to his face.

Hermione couldn't believe what she saw. There was a cat—no, a kneazle!—yowling and digging his claws into Draco's face.

"Crookshanks!" Her cat gave one last swipe to Malfoy before releasing him and jumping into her arms. The orange fur ball began purring, snuggling into her.

"What the fuck is that hideous thing?" Draco pointed his finger at her cat. "And why does it have a name?"

She covered Crook's ears.

"Don't listen to the pointy faced bastard. You're beautiful," she cooed to her cat. "This is the love of my life, Malfoy, so you need to treat him with respect."

"Your cat—" He seemed to connect the dots to her list. "Love of your life? Do I need to be jealous of him?"

"Certainly."

Draco flicked his wand, and a mirror hovered in front of him. With a heavy scowl, he inspected the scratches on his face, weeping tiny dots of crimson.

"How did the beast even find you and get through the wards?"

That was a good question. He must have travelled far. She gathered Crooks up and examined his smooshed face. He didn't seem pleased to see her, despite his purring. She'd stopped trying to figure out how the cat got around a long time ago. A sharp relief washed over her.

"Crooks always finds me."

Draco pointed his finger at her cat again and spoke as if he understood. "Don't eat the fucking peacocks. On second thought, do go after them. Al and Fred will teach you a bloody lesson."

Crookshanks hissed at him.

"Al and Fred?"

"Alfred's progeny." Draco snapped his fingers. "Keep up, Granger."

She'd been so distracted by her cat appearing, she'd looked over something important.

"We slept here." She glanced around at the front sitting room. Hermione felt herself blush at the thought. She'd never slept with many people, so she had a burning question. "Do I snore?"

"I thought you were a mandrake."

"I don't believe you."

"You drool too."

"I do not!" She said in outrage. But then she spotted a slight wet spot on the top of his shirt.

Draco took pity on her embarrassment, changing the subject.

"Do you want to learn how to apparate today?" he asked.

Hermione bolted up in excitement.

---

They spent their days in a pleasant dance. After breakfast, Draco would brew his potions. The room always smelled of pickled beet and sulphur, and the scent clung to his clothes. On his days off, he researched outdated or obscure potions in the library, keeping a quill tucked behind his ear in concentration. She loved watching his expression as inspiration arrived. His eyes lit up in excitement, and he'd furiously scratch his quill against the parchment, as if the idea would vanish back into the void if he didn't get it out right away.

After finishing his theory, he would show her the idea, asking for her input. They'd hover together over the parchment, getting closer each day, as she tweaked the measurements, advising slicing the ingredients in a different way. Maybe turning the ladle clockwise three times inside of four. When she spoke, he kept his attention on her, though sometimes she found it wandered over her body.

In those moments, her skin ached to be touched, warring with her mental trauma, yet he never attempted to bridge the gap.

In the afternoons, he'd either go on errands, or he'd practise apparition with her, determined for her to master it before moving on to another subject. It was a much harder task without a wand, so she spent most of her free time studying wandless magic to compensate. Her body remembered her old practice, a muscle memory, though atrophied from years of relying on a magical wand core to direct instead of her hands. So far, she could cross the room without splinching, but not much further.

Later in the evening, they'd normally eat dinner together, and then they'd end their night in the movie room. He'd transfigured the chairs into a couch, so she could lay her head on his shoulder with his arm across the back of the couch as they watched a new movie every day.

The muggles fascinated her. Growing up, she'd always felt separate from them, as if they were somehow a different species of human, subpar, a tier below wizards.

But watching them, she found them extraordinary. They made up for their lack of magic with their own clever inventions. Automobiles and telephones. Aeroplanes and boats. Guns and vacuums. It was like meeting her extended family for the first time, a whole host of strange cousins.

Her mind yearned to be reminded of what she'd forgotten, and she discovered a beauty to their struggle. Had her parents used these objects? She remembered the toaster on the counter. If she concentrated, she could envision her mother cleaning her clothes in a machine and then hanging them over a line, pinning them on, using the sun instead of drying charms.

The dance of their routine, though comforting in its solitude, soon approached a change, and her time to finally see her friends was on the horizon.

She had an odd feeling that Draco wished to keep them in their own bubble forever, all to himself.

But all bubbles popped.

---

At the end of the month, they arrived through the floo into the foyer of a townhome. From the way Draco described it, she thought it would be small, yet calling it a townhome understated its size and elegance. White linen curtains. Silver and crystal accents. A painting of a rose that slowly lost its petals. Of course, it didn't compare to either manor, but everything spoke to old wealth.

"Who does the residence belong to again?"

"The Carrow twins," he said with a slight curl of his lip. Whoever he referenced, he didn't like. He grabbed her arm and leaned down. "Don't allow yourself to be alone with Alecto. She has a habit of overstepping her boundaries, regardless of the consequences."

One night a month, the purebloods got together to have a soirée. Tradition dictated that the muggleborns be allowed to socialise for a luncheon before the party—overseen by monitors.

Besides her friends, she'd never been around any muggleborns, and the thought of meeting so many at once left her equal parts excited and nervous.

An elf popped up and took her winter coat.

Draco gave a glance to her fidgeting fingers as she picked at the edge of her pale pink dress. "There's no need to be anxious."

Easy for him to say.

"Will Katie be here?" she asked.

"She should be," he said. "Not the others though." He meant Dean and Finch, who had separate rules from the women.

"Has Julie—"

"She hasn't gone through it yet, but she should soon. The Goyles have used the money they earned from Flint and have tried to settle a similar arrangement for Julie."

Despite shivering at the idea of Julie entering the Trials, Hermione liked Greg. He had a gentle, old soul. A little stupid, sure, but she suspected he'd give Julie what she wanted out of life.

The elf stopped in front of a set of double doors. She heard a lot of noise behind it, and she came to realise there were more people than she first thought.

"I feel like I'm dropping you off at school," he teased. "Remember to bully them before they can bully you, so you can establish dominance right away."

"Is that what your father told you before dropping you off at Hogwarts?"

"It worked."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Top shelf advice. I'm sure it made you many friends."

The elf opened the doors to reveal a room made larger with obvious extension charms. Ten circular tables stood under giant chandeliers. Muggleborns were sitting at the tables in floor-length dresses. Some stood, others hovered near the refreshment table. Some were visibly pregnant, others clutched young babies.

"We'll need to put on a show to mitigate suspicion," he said

"What do you mean?"

He dipped his head and placed his lips on her cheek, close enough to her mouth it fooled the onlookers. Despite not being a real kiss, the touch seared down her body. When he pulled away, she felt dazed.

"For show," she whispered as if to remind herself.

"Now go in there and show me what a brave little witch you can be." He gave her a playful smack on her bum.

She turned to admonish him for his audacity, but he'd already exited, and by the time she looked again at the room, all eyes were on her.

She watched as a few of them whispered behind their hands.

A glass shattered.

"Hermione?"

Hermione searched the crowd, recognizing the voice, heart hammering in her chest from excitement and nerves.

Finally, she found her. Hermione placed a hand over her chest. The rest of the room faded away, leaving just her and one of her oldest friends. Someone she'd worried over for months.

"Katie," she choked on the name, swallowing the pain.

Her friend looked radiant. Healthy. Whole. She didn't wear a dress, nor trousers, but something in-between. It looked like shorts attached to a shirt, and it made Hermione smile, because Katie hated dresses.

They stared at each other for a few seconds more, before Katie ran toward her. Hermione did too, until they almost collided.

Katie kissed both her cheeks, sobbing in her arms.

"Oh Merlin, Hermione." Her tears wet her dress. "I'm so happy to see you. I can't believe that prat won you against Titus. It just doesn't seem possible."

Hermione pulled back to look at her, brushing away a few of Katie's tears with the pad of her thumb. The rest of the room began to talk, but many of the eyes still stayed on them.

It seemed no one told Katie that Malfoy hadn't really won. They must be keeping it a secret that a muggleborn won her own Trial.

"I have so many questions," Hermione said.

"Me too." Katie glanced around, as if being reminded that they weren't alone. "But we'll keep them for later. Not everyone can be trusted here when it comes to an honest conversation."

At least thirty muggleborns milled around the room at the moment. She assumed there were more in other places.

Being the center of attention gave her heart palpitations. Mustering her courage, she looped her arm in Katie's, letting her friend lead her to a table with three women. Before they got there, Katie whispered in her ear.

"Just to warn you, they like to tease new girls. It's a bit of an initiation. Don't feel like you have to answer any of their questions."

Hermione almost asked to clarify, but a sharp gasp cut her off.

"Bloody hell," someone said. "It's you."

Hermione met the eyes of a woman with dark skin, tiny braids, and eyes that glowed with intelligence. She might be the most stunning woman she'd ever seen.

It was an instant recognition, bringing back memories of a chaotic hospital and a little boy dying in his mother's arms.

Before Hermione could formulate a response, the woman shoved her squirming baby into another muggleborn's arms, stood up, and crushed her in a suffocating hug.

"We searched everywhere for you. I never thought I'd get to thank you," Her voice warbled with emotion. "You saved my son."

"I didn't do much."

She'd only helped tie off the arm, but the healer had arrived moments later.

The woman shook her head and kissed her cheeks.

"You helped me on the worst day of my life. I'll never forget it." She stared at her while Hermione shifted on her feet, and then her eyes softened with understanding. "I can see this is making you uncomfortable, so I won't make it a big deal. However, I make no promises for when you meet Thorfinn tonight." She reached down and gave a single squeeze of her hand. "I'm Zala. Sit down, and I'll introduce you. Katie's talked about you nonstop for months, so we're all curious."

Hermione looked over to Katie who gave a tight smile and took her seat.

Zala retrieved her baby from the pregnant muggleborn and lowered herself into a chair. A boy by the looks of it. He fussed.

"Always hungry." Zala lowered the front of her dress, so the baby could attach to her breast.

"He's cute," Hermione said, watching in fascination, trying to find something to say. She'd never seen many babies in her life. Just in passing. "How many children do you have?"

"This is our third." The baby put a chubby hand on his mother's chin while feeding. He seemed to already be going to sleep. "All of them boys as big as their father."

"Thorfinn barely looks at her and she gets pregnant," Katie teased.

Zala gave a huff but didn't refute it.

"The brute really wants a little girl to spoil, but we keep having boys. I told him he has one more chance after this and then I'm done. We'd have twenty children if it was up to him. Sit down, girl," she admonished. "You're making me nervous."

Hermione hesitated, still feeling out of place, but sat down, attempting not to fidget.

"This is Abigail." Katie motioned to the pregnant girl who had dark blond hair, watery blue eyes, and a gap between her front two teeth. "She's the breeder for the younger Lestrangle."

By sheer will, Hermione withheld her grimace of disgust. Rabastan had always given her the creeps, and Titus never let her in his vicinity much. But she must not have done a great job hiding her expression, because the girl barked out a laugh.

"Oh, I see you've met my *lovely* master." The sarcasm was heavy. "No need to pity me. I'm not his type, so I don't have to withstand his attention very often. Honestly, I've gotten fucked more by Rodolphus." Hermione almost dropped her fork in shock, and Abigail laughed at her reaction. "Oh, she's adorable, Katie. So innocent still."

Was this the teasing Katie warned her about?

"But Bellatrix—"

"Bellatrix doesn't care who her husband fucks. And I can't lie, his cock is much more pleasant than Rabastan's. He beds me so much, I'm fairly sure this is Rodolphus' child. Though it hardly matters, I suppose, especially to them. A Lestrangle baby is a Lestrangle baby."

"I just didn't realise—" Hermione didn't know how to verbalise it.

"You didn't realise that the men trade sometimes?" Abigail grinned. "You'll soon learn the appetites of men."

"Not just the men," the third woman said. She seemed a little older, maybe in her thirties with lovely brown eyes and deep olive skin. A scar marred her left cheek. "My master's wife

always wants me to join them. Has a thing for women. I'll admit it's more pleasant to lick a cunt than to suck a cock."

This time she did drop her fork, and Abigail and the older woman howled with laughter. Zala rolled her eyes.

"They make you do that?" Hermione asked, feeling ill with the thought. "Couldn't you say no?"

"I suppose so, though it's better to please your master if you want to stay in the household. And if they marry, you'll need to earn her favour too, or it's a fast journey to being given up or sold. Right now, your pussy is fresh and new to Malfoy, but give it a few years, and he might find another that's warmer and tighter." Her voice went lower, more serious. "So the biggest rule for our little group is not to judge other muggleborns."

"I'm not—" Maybe she had been. Hermione swallowed. "I just didn't think that—"

"She's been sheltered, Livia," Katie cut in. "Stop trying to scare her. Not all of the men are like that."

"You only say that because Flint would rather be buried deep inside you than anywhere else... for *now*. And Thorfinn is an alien species. I've never seen a man so in love. But the rest of them? Dogs, all of them."

Katie curled her fingers around a napkin, leaving Hermione with many questions, but she didn't want to ask them in front of the other women.

"It's because Thorfinn is scared of me," Zala added, adjusting the child in her arms. "He knows that if he dares try to get a wife or a mistress, I'll castrate him."

"True," Livia said with a sly grin. "Though the brute would probably be turned on by the violence." Then she turned her grin toward Hermione in a way that made her wary, knowing she was about to be interrogated. "So... how is the younger Malfoy? I'm not going to lie, I've had a few fantasies about his horrid father. He might be one of the worst of them, but there's something about that hair. Or maybe it's the cane."

"It's the cane." Abigail gave a wiggle of her eyebrow.

"Gross," Hermione sneered. "Draco's nothing like him."

"*Draco*, hmm? So cozy. The son sure looks like his father. So spill the details. Does he have a big cock?"

"Liv, you promised not to tease," Katie warned.

"I'm only curious."

Hermione felt like hiding in a hole somewhere.

"I—don't know."



"Oh, that's right," Abigail said. "You probably haven't seen very many yet. But what about Nott?"

"They're similar, I guess."

Both Katie and Zala gasped in shock, and Hermione realised her error. She'd just admitted to knowing the size of Titus' cock.

At the moment, she'd gladly allow a sinkhole to swallow her.

Katie's eyes stabbed her, as if to peel away the answers. Hermione shook her head, begging her to drop it for now.

"I've heard Nott's a great lover," Livia added, looking at her carefully. "My master's wife had an affair with him a few years ago, and she still talks about him. He may like to butcher, but he seems to also know how to fuck. Though—it makes sense that a person whose expertise is pain would also understand pleasure."

"We didn't do much," Hermione tried to clarify. "Not sex, of course. Just—"

"Of course," Zala interrupted gently, placing a comforting hand on her arm. "He wouldn't have dared, or he'd have been in Azkaban. They'd know you weren't a virgin before the—"

Zala cut herself off.

The energy at the table shifted at the mention of the ritual. No one looked at each other.

"Bloody hell," Abigail interrupted, rubbing at her distended stomach. "That was a hard kick. It feels like a bludger is resting on my bones. The sooner this parasite is out, the better. I don't know how you've done this three times, Zala."

"How far along are you?" Hermione asked, thankful for the change of topic.

"If the gods are good, I'd deliver today, though I'm not technically due for a few weeks."

Hermione resisted the compulsion to glance down at her own flat stomach, wondering what it would look and feel like for another human to grow inside her. It would be her fate one day—a child, half hers and half Malfoy's. It felt surreal to think about.

"Are you hungry or thirsty?" Katie asked, maybe sensing she needed a small break. "I'll go with you."

Her friend stood, and Hermione hopped up, eager to leave, following her as she walked toward a table laden with food and a punch bowl on the opposite side of the room.

When they got halfway, Katie whispered low. "How are you really? And don't you dare lie to me."

"I'm okay, honestly. Draco is—well, he's—"

She didn't know how to explain their complicated relationship.

"When Marcus told me that Nott was competing for you, I thought it might be better for you to go to him. And then when Malfoy won, I was afraid you'd gone to someone cruel."

It was too complicated to explain to Katie that she'd chosen Draco. Not here.

"And you?" Hermione asked carefully. "When the coin—well, it was black, and then blue."

"I fell into a depression for a little while," she admitted. "I missed home. Didn't even eat. But it's gotten better. Marcus isn't so bad. I'm still not very attracted to him, but it could be worse. He lets me fly, and he's gruff and shy still, but not mean. Really, I don't want you to worry about me."

"But it's yellow a lot now," she said. "There must be something wrong. Has he taken you to a healer?"

Katie grabbed her hand while still walking and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm not sick," she said. "I'm pregnant. This is my— second time. The first didn't work out. It's still early, so please don't tell anyone."

Hermione almost fell over. But of course, she was pregnant. A part of Hermione suspected that all along. The average muggleborn got pregnant within the first six months, because they weren't provided with contraceptives. Katie might have even conceived the first time on the ritual night, which made her a little nauseous to think about.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"Are you happy about it?" Hermione asked.

Katie frowned, lips thinning.

"Flint is. I'm... coming around to the idea."

Hermione nodded, deciding to drop the subject since it seemed to make Katie upset.

They both loaded up their plates in silence. Even without words, it felt good to be back next to her best friend. Hermione placed several tea cakes on her plate and turned.

"Do you think we—" a body barreled into her. The collision caused two sets of plates to fly and clatter on the ground.

"Watch where you're going," a young woman, probably in her late twenties with slick black hair and striking green eyes, glared at her. Hermione didn't remember the last time she'd been spoken to with so much vitriol.

"I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Spoiled cunt. Stay out of my way."

Angry magic simmered in her fingertips, but she forced it to go dormant again.

The woman shoved past her before she could respond, slammed several biscuits on her plate, and walked away. Hermione watched her as she made her way over to the corner and sat by herself, inhaling the dessert as if it caused her offence.

Katie made a low noise under her breath.

"Ignore her. She's a foul bitch to everyone. Her master forces her to come to these things, but she sits by herself and doesn't socialise."

"Who's her master?"

"Some man with the last name Gilbert. It's her third master. The first two sold her off. Probably because of her unpleasant personality."

Hermione didn't know how to feel.

"What's her name?"

"Carmen." Katie spat it out like a curse. "She tried to come on to Marcus a few months ago, so she's lucky she's still in one piece."

Hermione blinked a few times.

"She must not know how hard you can throw a punch."

They both snorted in amusement, remembering the time she'd punched Dean, after he'd knocked her off her broom. He'd sported a black eye for a week.

Still, seeing the girl sit by herself made her feel pity, even if it was intentional solitude.

---

When Hermione got back to the table, she found Abigail absent.

"She wasn't feeling her best," Livia explained.

Katie, Zala, and Livia looked at each other, secretly communicating something.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Rabastan yelled at her again," Zala explained. "We heard it from here."

"Rabastan's a wanker," Hermione said.

"Yes, but more so today than usual. He threatened to give her to one of his friends after the birth if she complained again. For good."

"But surely they wouldn't really separate a child from its mother," Hermione said without thinking. But as soon as she said it, she remembered the way Titus tried to buy her from Malfoy, saying he'd let him have an heir and a spare. It was hard to come to terms with her new knowledge, when it conflicted with her old.

Zala reached out with her free hand and clutched her arm. Something about the woman's presence soothed her.

"I can see this is a lot to take in for you. We live at the whims of our Masters, but it doesn't mean they're all cruel."

Livia pursed her lips in disagreement, but didn't say anything.

Hermione viewed Carmen in the corner. What had happened that caused her to be so bitter? She glanced back at Livia.

"Do you have any children?"

The woman nodded.

"Two, and I've been lucky enough to stay with them. I'm fortunate that my master's wife likes me."

Her master's wife liked her tongue. It had been said as a shocking joke earlier, but it now held a darker edge.

"So..." Livia said, noticing the uncomfortable silence as Hermione digested everything. "You never did tell us how the young Malfoy is in bed. I bet he's eager. The younger ones always are. I bet he never leaves you alone."

"Well—" Hermione felt her cheeks heat again. She didn't think she'd ever be comfortable talking about intimate things. "We haven't—what I mean is that it's only been once."

The silence lingered. The women looked at her with wide eyes.

"Are you saying you've only had sex one time since your Trials?" Katie asked.

"Well, not since. Just... at the Trials."

"Is he gay?"

"Liv!" Katie admonished.

"I'm serious. I've never heard of a man waiting a month to shag again. Even Marcus had you on your back within a few weeks."

Katie frowned and bit her lip.

"Draco just wants to give me time." Hermione stopped herself before she continued, realising the implications she admitted. No sex equals no babies. She really should stop talking while

nervous.

Zala cocked her head, staring as if suddenly seeing through her while slowly rocking her sleeping child.

"He doesn't want to force you," she whispered. "That's admirable, but you'll need to start again soon. If not, the ministry gets involved, and their tests are— invasive."

"Why are you waiting?" Livia asked.

"I'm— well, the thought of— I'm just not interested anymore."

Livia's expression softened. "If it helps your fear, it doesn't hurt the second time. Actually, depending on the man, it can feel very good. For many of us, it's the only benefit of the arrangement." She sighed. "Alright, no more teasing. I'm finished trying to shock you. It's not fun anymore. Let's talk about something else."

As if prompted, Katie's eyes brightened. "Did you see the Chudley Cannons—"

Zala and Livia groaned with good humour. For the rest of the lunch, the conversation stayed on more pleasant topics.

Yet, for long after, her mind kept replaying Livia's words, wondering about the benefits of entering Draco's bed.

---

Later that night, Hermione put on the evening dress Malfoy had given her. It had an underskirt of red velvet that came to mid-thigh with an overdress of sheer red netting, floor length, with red lace appliqué in a rose pattern throughout that exposed the skin beneath, strategically placed to cover her breasts.

With it, she wore delicate teardrop ruby earrings, twisting her hair up to show them off. He'd told her they were his mother's earrings. The shoes he gave her had pointed heels, like the muggle woman's had, though Hermione's were a bit shorter. They still gave her a few extra inches in height.

Hermione was shocked by the dress. Titus had never allowed the skirt of her dresses to rise above her knees, except at Goyle's party, and she would never have worn something so revealing of her body.

When she finished dressing, she left her room and walked to the floo, stumbling as she walked in the unfamiliar heels.

Draco froze upon seeing her, straightening against the mantle. His hand went to his throat, as if to loosen the collar of his dress shirt.

Hermione blushed at the inspection, unused to showing so much skin in public.

"It's not too much, is it? It's not very proper."

"No," Draco agreed. "It's not proper at all." His hand fell away from his collar. "But you'll find that what you're wearing is standard. In fact, the dress I gave you is conservative compared to the others."

Hermione didn't understand how the dress could be defined as conservative. She'd never shown so much skin in her life, except in her bathing costume while swimming.

"We'll apparate instead of floo." He held out his hand for her to take. "I've been to the Carrows' townhome enough, there's no risk of splinching. Are you ready to make everyone jealous?"

"Why would anyone be jealous?"

"Because you're with me."

Hermione rolled her eyes and took his hand.

"I'm not sure how your head stays upright with how big your ego—"

They disappeared with a crack.

---

They landed in the familiar foyer of the townhome again. The same elf popped up and took their cloaks.

Draco's hand was still in hers. She'd been clutching it so hard in anxiety that her nails indented his skin. She almost apologised, but he slipped the hand behind her back as they followed the elf leading them through the corridors, cutting off her thoughts with the intimate touch.

When they entered the ballroom, she noticed it spanned even larger than before. Probably a hundred people milled around inside. Chairs and tables dotted the room, along with three chandeliers and four fireplaces. People stood with drinks in their hands. Some sat, all dressed in expensive robes. Women draped themselves across the men's laps. One man had his hands on a woman's upper thigh, nibbling on her ear until she squirmed and frowned.

A few of the women were dressed in a deep blood red—the same colour she wore. Some women dressed in blue. The greatest number were in green.

Draco had been correct—her dress practically covered her up compared to the others—racy slits all the way to scandalous places, backs dipped so low it almost revealed their arse, breasts spilling out of the top, dripping in jewels, with pretty makeup, and shoes with dangerous points.

"What do the colours mean?" She asked. They hadn't moved yet, as if he knew how shocking she'd find it.

"Red is for the breeders. Blue for the wives, if they have them, though most wives don't want to attend, if you can imagine. The green are for the mistresses. Some men bring *all three*."

Hermione crinkled her lip in distaste at the thought.

Her mind flashed to the red cloak Titus had given her the year prior for Christmas. She'd thought nothing of the colour then, but now she sensed it might have been a hint at what he'd wanted from her.

"Just a warning," she hissed. "Get a wife or a mistress, and I'll have fun stringing you up somewhere high that you can't get down."

Draco snorted out a laugh.

"Hermione," someone called so loudly that part of the room quieted down and looked toward the entrance. Draco straightened and kept his hand firmly on her lower back, tugging her closer.

Hermione searched the crowd, recognizing the voice, finding Katie standing and waving at her, next to Zala.

Her friend wore a similar outfit with shorts, though it had been made from expensive material. The red contrasted beautifully with her skin and dark hair. She wore bright red lipstick to match, and it tilted up with her lips.

Flint sat behind her, and the sight of him caused everything inside her to lock up at once, reminding her of his role in her ritual.

Did he drug and rape Katie after her Trials?

Of course, he did.

The black galleon burned in her mind.

Draco pushed on her back, urging her forward. When they got closer, Flint gave a nod of his head toward them, but Hermione only glared back.

To her surprise, Katie sat back down in Flint's lap. The man grinned, showing his jagged teeth, and tugged her close, giving her a kiss on her cheek. Knowing her friend didn't find him attractive, it caused her stomach to sour, though Katie only gave him a playful smile in return.

Next to Zala sat a blond giant with a scruffy beard and long hair to his shoulders. She'd never seen someone so bulky. It looked like he could pick up a tree with ease and replant it elsewhere.

Before they could sit at the table, Zala put a hand on the blond giant's arm. "Thorfinn, it's her. The one I mentioned."

"Who's her?" The giant's attention snapped to Hermione. "Oh, you're the Nott ward aren't you? He keeps a picture of you on his desk in the ministry. I heard you transferred to Malfoy here."

Now that she thought of it, she might have seen a picture of him before too. He worked for the DMLE. Titus was his superior.

"No, you big idiot. She's the girl that helped Zane. Tied off his arm."

An intense emotion crossed Thorfinn's face. It reminded her of grief and hope and gratitude. Without warning, the giant jumped up, and tugged her from Draco, engulfing her in an awkward hug, almost squeezing her to death, lifting her off the ground

"I'm forever in your debt, little muggleborn."

Both he and Zala were very—touchy.

"It's Hermione," she squeaked out, unsure what else to do.

"Put her down, Rowle." Draco didn't seem angry. More amused.

As if reminded, Thorfinn dropped her, placing a heavy hand on her shoulder and leaning down to look in her eyes as she tried to find her footing again. "I owe you a wizard debt."

She didn't know much about wizarding debts, except they were deathly serious. She gave a single nod. Not sure what else to do. She didn't think she deserved a wizarding debt. She'd just been in the right place and the right time. And of course she'd help a child that was bleeding out. Who wouldn't?

"The healers told me if my boy had lost any more blood, they might not have been able to save him in time." He outstretched his hand, and Hermione took it, giving a ferocious shake. "You think you did a little, but I think you did a lot. Come, sit down. You look like you might fall soon."

She did feel a little wobbly in her heels, unused to wearing them.

Hermione almost complied with the order, but Draco took the empty seat and tugged at her hips, pulling her into his lap before she could. She froze, his leg firm under her arse. He leaned over and whispered into her ear.

"I have to play the part, or they'd be suspicious." He gave a nod upward to indicate the rest of the room. She understood what he meant. They didn't have to touch in private, but it might look odd if he didn't in public. And if suspicion spiked, they might be investigated.

Her eyes roamed the room, recognizing a few people. Some were Titus' colleagues who she'd met on occasion, but most of the room consisted of strangers.

She sat stiffly against Draco, while his fingers drummed against her thighs. The men began talking about quidditch and other boring topics, and her mind stayed on Draco's hand on her legs.

A few minutes later, hors d'oeuvres and cups of punch floated by on trays. She grabbed one as it teetered by, held up by magic.



"That's alcoholic," Draco warned her.

"Good," she answered and downed the whole thing. A fruity flavour burst on her tongue.

"Relax," he whispered. " You're doing great."

Because she was a hopeless swot on the best of days, the praise caused her hair to stand on end, pooling low in her stomach.

Three cups of punch later, and heat bloomed along her cheeks. Her body loosened, along with her anxiety, and she began to lean into Draco's touch. His fingers wandered, tracing patterns along her skin. She knew it was for show, but her mind sensed the caress along her arm, sprouting tingles in its wake as he reached up to play with her loose curls, twirling them around his fingers. He bent forward during a lull in conversation, placing a blistering kiss against her neck below her ear.

After an hour, music began to play, and some of the men tugged up their partners, dancing with them. They rubbed against each other in a way that shocked her. The men's hands grabbed at the women as the chandeliers dimmed. Floating candles lit in the center of the table, but the lack of light made it seem a dream.

Some of the couples began kissing - and off in the corner, Hermione thought she might have seen another couple doing a whole lot more.

Raucous laughter and little squeals and pounding music.

Another floating punch went by, and Hermione tried to grab it, but Draco pushed her hand down before she could.

Hermione pouted while the music throbbed along her body. A part of her wished the hand that held her thigh would wander to the center. It sounded like such a good idea that she wiggled, causing his hand to slip. He tugged it back, placing it on the table.

She moaned in frustration, rocking against him, seeking the friction. His cock stiffened under her arse in response

"What are you doing?" His voice rasped.

"You can touch me." Each second she felt more desperate to press on her clit. It began to hurt.

"You're sloshed," he said after examining her.

"My first time," she slurred. She'd drunk the occasional glass of wine, but she'd never gotten drunk.

Draco laughed, and it rang around her. Everything exploded into happy feelings and bright colours. Why had she been nervous again? She looked over to see Marcus smiling at Katie, telling her something that made her look exasperated. Zala was now in Thorfinn's lap, and it looked as if they might need a private room later.

Everywhere was skin and touching and laughter. It swirled in her mind, infecting her. She knew enough to sense she'd be disturbed by the sight if sober. Off to the side, a man grabbed a woman's dress and shoved the top down, exposing her breasts. She shrieked at first in dismay, but the man gave her another sip of punch while he buried his face against her chest to the chants of others.

"More than sloshed, I think," Draco growled beside her. His deep voice made her groan, and she pressed her thighs together. "Fuck, Montague must have added an aphrodisiac again. I should have tested the punch before giving it to you."

That made sense. She leaned over and kissed the hot skin of his neck, and he groaned.

"I ache," she said.

Draco gave her a pained expression.

"Any other time, love, but you don't mean it right now."

She pouted again and leaned forward, resting her mouth against his neck again, this time lingering. He smelled so good, she could drink him in, consume him. The beat of his pulse flickered under her lips, speeding up as she let her tongue dip out and press against his skin, dragging up to his ear.

"I feel empty," she begged. "I need you to fill me."

He shuddered, hands tightening along her waist, but then he pushed her off him and stood up.

"I think it's time to get you home before things start getting out of control."

Maybe he was right. She pressed a hand to her forehead, wobbling even worse than before. Hermione turned to say goodbye to Katie and Zala, but they were in positions that should make her blush. Flint's hand had pushed up under the thin fabric of Katie's shorts, and she had turned toward him on his lap, moving her hips.

Was she drunk too? No, Katie had only drank water.

Was this what all their parties were like? She'd never seen anything like it. A part of her was intrigued and aroused, the other part repulsed, though the arousal might be winning. It tingled along her body, missing Draco's firm hands exploring her.

She wanted it so bad she might beg soon.

Draco tried to lead her out.

"Enjoy your night," a man told them, stepping in front of their path to exit. "You can thank me later."

"If you don't get out of my presence, Montague, I won't stop my impulse to kill you," Draco snapped.

"Bloody hell, you're ungrateful. What's gotten into you?"

Draco shoved past him, knocking his shoulder hard. Hermione couldn't keep up with the punishing pace as Draco attempted to flee the room, and she tipped forward, tripping on her heels.

Before she could fall, he swooped her up in a tight hold, arms under her back and legs, trying to angle her face to his chest as if to shield her.

Her vision proved fuzzy, but as they passed a table, she saw a man pressing a woman in a red dress stomach down on the table, flipping up her skirt to expose her arse, while his hands undid his belt. Her eyes blinked in drugged acceptance.

"Do you mind if I take a turn after you?" Another man at the table asked. "I'll pay you, of course."

"Not today. She's fertile right now. But you can take her mouth. Half the normal payment. Go on." The man slapped the woman's bare arse. "Show my friend here how well you suck cock."

The second man stood up, looking eager, and unzipped his trousers, tugging the woman's face close. "Open wide, pretty."

Hermione glanced away, not wanting to see any more, feeling sick and disturbed. The alcohol no longer felt pleasant in her stomach. Everything that had seemed colourful and happy turned sinister.

"I shouldn't have brought you here," Draco said as he carried her out of the room.

As they walked, she tried to concentrate. She really did, but she wanted to touch him, lick him, suck him. She imagined bringing his cock into her mouth like the woman did to Titus in the study. Was that desire real or the drug?

"I'll get our cloaks later," he said, as her own hand began to wander along his chest, feeling the firm muscles under his shirt. "We need to get you back to the manor before the potion really starts to affect you."

As they made it to the floo, Draco hurtled to a stop. She twisted her head to find Titus staring at her, having just stepped out of the fireplace in the process of shedding his cloak. Beside him was a beautiful woman she'd never seen in a green dress.

All of them paused and stared at each other, the seconds lasting for eternity. Rage flared in Titus' eyes, viewing her curled in Draco's arms. The woman placed a hand on his arm, but he shoved it off and pointed a finger at Hermione.

"She's drugged," his voice came out raspy.

"It was Montague," Draco explained. "I'm bringing her home to sleep it off."

"The kind Montague uses doesn't sleep off."

"I fucking know that," Draco barked back. "It's my problem to solve. Get out of my way."

A muscle ticked in Titus' jaw as he said nothing else, but he stepped aside, though his hand went to his robes as if he might tug out his wand. Draco walked forward, passing him by to grab the floo powder. As he did, she looked up to see Titus up close for the first time in a month.

Absolute pain. She read it off him easily. Why did it still hurt her to see it? He had dark circles under his eyes, and he was starting to grow a beard.

She still didn't like thinking of Titus. Though she knew leaving him had been for the best, it was like learning to function without a limb.

"Titus?" the woman asked.

"I've lost interest in attending tonight." Titus began to put his cloak on again. "You can stay, if you wish. I don't care."

"Should I come back with—"

"No, I desire to be alone."

"Maybe tomorrow?" She sounded hopeful.

"I told you from the beginning that this was nothing."

The woman seemed hurt by the answer, but Titus didn't pay her any attention. His eyes were on Hermione, but there was nothing soft in his gaze.

Hermione kept Titus' violent stare, curling closer to Draco, the drug pounding through her veins, as they disappeared through the floo.

---

When they arrived back at the manor, Draco walked toward the couch and placed her on it. He ran a hand through his hair and began to pace.

"It hurts," she groaned. Her clit felt tender, raw.

"I know. Fuck, let me think."

"How do I stop it?"

Without waiting for an answer, her finger went down and brushed her clit. She nearly came off the couch in ecstasy. Fumbling with her knickers, she slid them down her legs while dragging up her dress, and then rubbed at her swollen clit, no longer caring for propriety. Fluid dripped down her hand as she glanced up to see Draco staring at her exposed cunt with a haunted expression.

"You'll need to orgasm," he explained, sounding strangled. "And you'll need my help with it. This potion is made to force... partnership" He walked over to the fireplace mantle and

placed a hand on the hard edge. Closing his eyes, he sucked in several deep breaths.

So stimulated, Hermione orgasmed with a shout, attempting to place her fingers deep inside. But it did nothing to slake the lust.

"Please," she groaned.

"Merlin, help me." He let go of the mantle and walked over, sitting beside her. She spread her legs further, seeking release from the terrible tension. It almost didn't feel good, it was so frantic.

His hand almost reached down, but then he retracted it.

"You need skin and my cum for it to go away, but I think we can be creative."

He hesitated, but his fingers went to the belt on his trousers and tugged. She watched through glazed eyes as he lowered his trousers and trunks, shoving them down to his ankles. Her mouth salivated at his exposed cock. It curved beautifully, thick and erect, slightly darker than the rest of his skin. A drop of cum beaded at the tip, and she desired to lick it up, press her tongue to the slit.

But when she reached for him, Draco grabbed her wrists.

"This is only for your pleasure." He seized her hips, pulling her toward him, positioning her so that she straddled one of his firm legs. The gauzy fabric on her dress puddled around her waist, and he rearranged it so most of it trailed behind her.

The pressure against her clit caused her to arch her back. Digging his fingers into her waist, he guided her hips back and forth.

"Ride me like this, as if you're masturbating," he ordered. She didn't need any encouragement. Her hips already moved on instinct, back and forth, rubbing her swollen arousal against his thigh.

"Draco," she lower half of her body felt electrified with each rock of her hips.

"Fuck, you're wet." As if by instinct, he almost reached down to her clit, but he pulled back his hand, curled it into a fist and bit the edge.

His other hand stroked his cock, eyes on her face.

It didn't take long for either of them. She grabbed her breast, playing with her tight nipples through the fabric, riding his thigh until stars burst behind her eyes, and she came with a shout.

The sight of her cumming, thigh wet with her release seemed to be too much for Draco. He gave a low groan and came, coating her dress and his bare skin.

"The desire will come back, unless I put my cum in you," he explained, swiping up some of his release.

"Make it stop," she begged.

He took a deep breath, as if to steady himself, and pressed his hand under her dress, shoving his finger in her dripping cunt.

With his long finger pressed up inside her, she moaned with instant relief and leaned forward, collapsing against his chest. Everything dissipated at once.

Draco withdrew his hand slowly and wrapped his arm around her back.

"This was my fault." His arms tightened when she shivered. She recognized the guilt in his tone, and she didn't want him to revert again to solitude, thinking she hated him. "I'm—"

"I don't blame you."

His body felt like a stone below her, hard and unmoving.

"You should."

Maybe he was right. Maybe he was wrong. It was all too fucked up to make a judgement. She no longer trusted her moral compass about people or situations.

On one hand, she understood Draco hated touching her without absolute consent. What he had to do tonight would eat at him.

On the other hand, he'd known what the party entailed. He'd seemed surprised by the aphrodisiac, showing it didn't happen all the time, but he'd known the punch had the potential to be laced.

No matter how well he treated her, Draco owned her. Abigail and Livia's warning echoed in her body. At any moment, he could discard her, sell her to someone else.

How could anything true grow from that fear?

A part of her acknowledged she should resent him for that fact and close herself off physically and emotionally, just in case he decided to be capricious and wound her.

But deep down, no matter how much she tried to deny it, she knew that would be hard, if not impossible. The physical and the emotional tangled together. Her walls already crumbled at the edges, chipped further every day she got to know him better.

It made it even more confusing that she'd just had the best orgasm of her life.

The benefits of the arrangement, indeed.

Art by [Ivmaruva](#)



## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: implied/ referenced rape. Dubious consent.

# Chapter 31: Roar of Rage

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: \$UICIDEBOY\$- "Antarctica"

Thank You to MyPrivateInsanity for being an amazing beta!

Frau Blucher made another amazing piece of art for the Ritual scene at the end of Chapter 27, The Venus of Willendorf.

Ivmaruva also created a stunning Hermione portrait based off House Pet. For some reason the image wouldn't stick, but the link to the art will be posted at the end of the chapter.

Trigger Warning at end:

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

## Roar of Rage

Hermione stood inside the manor's duelling room, reviewing her recent research for wandless magic—how it resided in everything as an element. Unless it reacted with a wand core, it tended to be invisible, especially to muggles, and it proved highly unstable.

Merging her new knowledge with muggle science, she suspected the ability to wield the volatile energy was a genetic mutation, passing from parent to child, though it sometimes happened spontaneously. She also believed magic—especially wandless magic—linked itself to brain waves, since focused intention mattered when casting. Similar to legilimency, using it required extending consciousness beyond the body. A wand core helped act as a conduit between the two to make it easier, as did verbal commands.

In theory, it seemed simple to cast wandless. In practice, she struggled. Directing without a wand required absolute, iron focus. And unlike casting with unicorn hair or dragon heartstring, emotion increased or decreased the efficacy, depending on the level of concentration. It explained why young children burst with accidental magic during heightened emotion, though they couldn't control it.

Hermione formed an image in her mind of magic racing through her veins. In response, it pooled in her fingertips, buzzing along her skin. She focused on a glass vase she'd placed across the room. Alongside it rested six others of different sizes and she'd grabbed them at random, she didn't doubt they were all priceless heirlooms.

A face flashed in her mind— a woman pressed to a table with a red dress shoved up around her waist. Despair stared back at Hermione, an unending void of agony. A hopeless



understanding that no one would save her.

The anger filtered through Hermione. Familiar. Comforting. She leaned into the feeling, letting it spark, striking flint to steel. The glass vase and the woman merged into one in her mind.

At this point, the magic always grew hard to control. A delicate balancing act from the prefrontal cortex to the limbic system.

Hermione held her breath until it hurt, a technique of control.

To free the vase from its current shape, she needed to mean the act of destruction.

Hermione squeezed her hands together, and the vase splintered into shards, flinging in all directions. Not wasting time, she levitated the next vase in the row— terracotta of Ancient Grecian origins.

Crack.

A goblin-made crystal vase turned into Katie's face.

Crack.

The wooden one twisted into Abigail, clutching her heavy belly. The material resisted her more than the others, and she increased the pressure.

Crack.

Livia came next with her sharp smile, hiding pain.

The bronze vase fractured into two, and a bead of sweat dripped down into her shirt with the effort.

The last metal vase morphed into herself, but her hands faltered. Her anger lessened, which meant her focus suffered.

Distracted by her task, Hermione didn't notice the door opening or Draco slipping inside.

She ignored him, outstretching her hand, having given up for the day. The vases reformed into what they'd been before.

"I'm impressed."

Malfoy leaned against the wall, arms crossed on his chest, staring at her in the way Titus often did, as if to dissect her mood.

Despite her best efforts, Malfoy had managed to evade her for a week. Maybe it was for the best. Because the more time she had to process what had happened, the larger her anger grew, until it transformed into a giant dragon breathing fire.

"You knew that could happen." She meant the party.

"In a way."

"You knew," she repeated, unwilling to let him deny it. "And now you're going to tell me everything you *did* know."

"Am I?" His voice held a slight warning in it.

"Yes."

Draco's features tightened. "I've attended the parties before, but they were milder. The ones my father hosted never turned into— that. If couples wanted to be intimate, they used one of our many guest rooms. There might have been a few shocking things, but the old guard tends to be more conservative. I thought this would be the same."

Hermione couldn't help the scoff. The unpleasant feelings had nowhere else to direct, and until he proved otherwise, Draco had thrown her without warning into a lion's den to be devoured.

"Why should I believe you?"

"Do you think a man like my father would appreciate being drugged? A man like Dolohov— or even Titus? The punch didn't differentiate."

That gave her pause. Titus barely drank, because he liked to be in control of himself and others at all times.

She doubted anyone cared what the women went through, but Merlin help the person who drugged Titus without his consent.

"Then what's the purpose of the parties?"

"A remnant from before the curse. Purebloods have always had extravagant parties. They've used them for politics and networking, among other things." He clenched his jaw before continuing. "Flint warned me that Montague had drugged the punch at a previous party as a joke, though he's not the only person who's done something similar. Montague had been reprimanded for it, so I assumed— " he stopped himself and conceded. "No, there's no excuse. I should have foreseen that unlike my father, the Carrows would allow debauchery."

"Were you required to bring me?"

That might have been what hurt the most. The fledgling trust she'd had in Draco had faltered. Paired with the warning the women had given her, it poisoned her hope.

Hermione had never expected love out of whatever future she lived.

But she did want respect.

Her whole life she'd been raised to believe she had an honourable position in society. Valued. Respected. But Titus had lied to her. He'd softened the hard edges of the world in an attempt to protect her.... or had it been to control her? Perhaps it had been both, though neither method of his helped her now.

Would Titus have brought her to the party? She had her doubts. He probably would have kept her closeted for the rest of her life, only bringing her out at controlled times.

"It would have looked odd if I didn't bring you the first time," he answered. "I didn't want to arouse suspicion. I thought we'd play the part, and— I'll never bring you again if you—"

"No," Hermione cut him off. The fear of being traded to someone else almost paralyzed her. "I'd rather not be investigated."

She believed him. He didn't realise the party would turn so fast, and once it did, he attempted to get her out. Even with her confusing emotions, she understood that part.

But there was one thing that she could not shake.

The woman's dead expression.

The man telling her to open wide.

*You'll soon learn the appetite of men.*

The debilitating fear of becoming any of those futures.

The selling of women might not have been a common sight in public, but it obviously happened often enough in private that no one seemed shocked.

"I want to make one thing clear, Malfoy." Hermione lifted the vase again in the air with her magic. Her will focused into a tiny point, her intent clear. She'd never felt more determined, imagining herself in the woman's place, face down, dress up. "If you *ever* try selling me to one of your repulsive friends, I'll make you suffer."

She squeezed, and the glass vase once again splintered into shards with a sharp crack. It left no illusions as to what she'd try to do to him if he violated her.

Draco lifted himself off the wall, face still expressionless, uncrossing his arms. He walked toward her with hard, purposeful steps.

The fast advance shocked her enough that she walked backward until her shoulders hit the wall behind her.

Draco loomed over her, placing his hands on either side of her head.

"Sell you?" He asked in a lethal tone that she'd never heard before. "What has ever given you the impression that I'd fucking sell you?"

"How can I trust you to be different?"

One hand grabbed her throat. Firm enough she couldn't move, but loose enough it didn't hurt. Her wrists twisted at her sides in warning, but Draco ignored her threat and met her stare.

"I think you've misjudged me." He narrowed his eyes and moved closer. "If there's one thing in this world you can trust, it's that I'm a selfish man. I *do not* share. When you chose me, you sealed your fate, and now I'm never letting you go. I doubt I'd be able to let you leave even if you wanted to. Do you fucking hear me? You're *mine*. Everything about you. And if anyone ever even thinks about touching you, I'd mutilate them."

"What could you do to stop them?"

"What could I do?" His countenance darkened. "My father personally trained me in the dark arts, brought me to executions and hunts before I even entered Hogwarts. I killed my first man on my father's orders when I was only thirteen years old, and I've committed the act many times since. You have no fucking clue about the things I can and will do. Do I make myself clear?"

She didn't know that about him. That he'd killed before— several times.

He gave a severe sneer, as if daring her to challenge him.

Draco always kept himself on a tight leash, occluding everything away. But in that moment, she saw the dark undercurrents rippling in his eyes. Her assumption about selling her seemed to anger him in a way that he'd never been before.

Hermione swallowed hard, knowing he could feel the movement as he clutched her oesophagus, wishing she didn't have to feel so much fear and hope.

The threat of being forever by his side, whether she liked it or not, should terrify her. But instead, it comforted her. A continuity she could rely on.

What would it be like to let go and trust?

How could she?

"I understand," she bit out.

"Do you want retribution?"

"What?"

"Punishment, Granger," he said. "Do you want me to *punish* Montague?"

"You could do that?"

"Montague is a small fish in a big sea. It might be hard to kill him without legal trouble, but he's not immune to— as you say— suffering."

The woman's dead stare flashed in her mind.

"Yes."

He grinned with the sharpness of a blade.

"Excellent, because I was going to do it anyway." He ran his hand along her throat. "It pleases me that you're as ruthless as I am, though a bit more impulsive."

His hand loosened on her throat, and his thumb went to her lip, dragging across it. For just a moment, his expression dropped to reveal hunger, as if he wanted to consume her.

Instead, he leaned his forehead on hers.

"From now on, the decision to attend anything will be entirely up to you, and I'll warn you of everything ahead of time. We're a team with this. Deal?"

"Deal," she agreed.

He glanced around the room, toward the shattered vase.

"Mipsy tells me you apparated far yesterday."

"Across the manor."

"That's my eager swot. Already exceeding expectations. Completely wandless too. I wish I could reward you." She blushed at the praise. "So do you think you've earned Occlumency lessons?"

Despite all of the turmoil she felt before, her heart leaped in excitement.

"Yes," she said.

"Hm," he considered. "We'll see. Some other time, we can practise apparating beyond the manor, but I think it's essential to protect your mind and control your emotions, especially around others. And if you get especially adept, perhaps I'll let you review what I plan to do with Montague."

---

"I can do this without touch," Draco pressed his fingers into her temples. "But this helps me do it without hurting you."

"Or you just want an excuse to touch me."

He grinned. "Figured out my motive. Now hold still."

His consciousness brushed against hers, like knocking on a door. The only time she'd felt true legilimency—and not projection—was after Knockturn Alley when Titus filtered through her thoughts. It had hurt then—so bad she'd vomited. As if her body remembered, she tensed.

"Relax."

She forced herself to loosen her muscles, and Draco slipped past her defences without resistance.

He stayed there at the edges of her mind without attempting to rifle through anything yet.

"First, create a wall," he said. "Find something you'd like to focus on."

"What do you use?"

His proximity distracted her, the scent of him drawing her in closer.

"A waterfall. Imagining noise along with a visual helps strengthen it for me. But you might find something more in tune—"

"A library?"

"A library is fine. Though in that case, you'll need to focus on the absence of sound, which might be difficult. But if that's what comes easiest, I'll help you build it."

"Should I imagine each book as—"

"That's rubbish. Separating the memories does nothing. It's too advanced for a beginner. To start, you just need a disguised wall."

His presence felt comfortable, though maybe too large for the space. Like attempting to fit into a dress a size too small.

She imagined the bookcase, reaching the ceiling of a blank room, the spines of the books red and green. She tried to imagine the titles, but Draco was right, it was too advanced. Instead, she focused on the wooden shelves, on it being solid and unbreakable.

"What memory will you attempt to find?"

"Something I'd like to relive."

He gave her a few more moments to prepare, before he nudged against the bookshelf she created.

It didn't take too long for it to break, and the glade burst behind her eyes. He lingered on the moment he had his hand up her skirt, panting against each other. The exact moment of her orgasm.

She managed to throw him out, though she suspected he didn't put up much resistance.

They tried it again and again, each time lingering on the same memory, until a flush spread along her body.

The last attempt—flustered and out of breath— she no longer had the attention to hold him back. Her frazzled thoughts blended together, and she accidentally brought up another memory. In another library.

*"Well, well, well, the little mudblood is also a thief."* Blaise's voice echoed in her mind as she clutched the skin bound book.

Hermione attempted to throw Draco out of her memories, but he held tight, scowl on his face, as he pushed through, reviewing everything until it hurt.

Blaise threatened her, pressed her against the bookcase. She could do nothing but relive the horrid moment.

*"See you soon, house pet."*

Draco tugged back out and stared at her, eyes hard. One hand dipped around and tangled against the hair on her scalp, tilting her face up.

"What the fuck was that?"

Hermione grimaced.

"Titus— handled it."

"Is that why Zabini doesn't have fingers on his wand hand?"

"Yes. Titus used a charmed blade to keep the fingers from ever being reattached."

"He's lucky Nott got to him first. Honestly, I'm not satisfied with the punishment. I'd already warned him what would happen if he crossed me."

Draco's hand tightened, and her scalp hurt.

"I think—" Hermione wet her lips. "I think I'm done with occlumency today."

Draco nodded, face set in a scowl. It was clear he had more questions, but he didn't press as he let her go. She stood up, attempting to practise building her walls again.

"Hermione," he said before she could walk out.

"Yes?"

"Do you still have the book?"

The skin bound book. She'd hoped he'd have missed that detail.

"It's back at the manor," she admitted. "Under the floorboards in my old room."

"That's for the best. That level of dark magic isn't something to be played with. The cost is too high."

"Of course," she hesitated. "However, if I was able to get it back, would you help me translate it?"

Draco hesitated, as if at war between pleasing her and stopping her. "Anything bound with skin is steeped in dark blood magic. It's dangerous. Though I know I'm not going to stop you, so if you plan on doing it, I'd rather you involve me."

Titus would have banned her from the book, taken it from her because of the danger. Draco agreed to help her, even though he disagreed with her experimenting with it.

She decided to extend her trust and show him the research she'd started.

"When you get home from the apothecary tomorrow, come to the library and I'll show you what I've discovered so far."

---

"These are the oldest Runic languages I could find, but I still have a feeling the book might be older— or at least the content." Hermione showed him the selection of books on the table. Most of them dated back at least two thousand years, held together by preservation spells. Still, even with the spells, the books yellowed, and the pages felt dusty under her fingertips.

Draco studied the group of texts.

"This one is the oldest, I believe." He placed a finger on the smallest book. A thin tome in Latin, possibly a translation of an even older language. Hermione was distracted by his hands. He had long fingers with wide palms. Veins ran over the top, given the impression of strength.

Since the party night, her old desire flared back to life. Her nerves had tasted release, and they wanted it again. The occlumency lessons only threw oxygen on the fire.

Livia's words ran through her mind.

*The benefits of the arrangement.*

There had been a brief pleasure toward the end of the ritual. She'd been ashamed of it then. But should she have been? Maybe enjoying something meant to harm her was the ultimate coup.

Or maybe she just needed to orgasm again, clear her mind from making knee-jerk decisions.

She shook her head and realised Draco was staring at her in a funny way. Though he wasn't using legilimency, she wondered how much he discerned from her body language.

Did he know that his hands were making her think of dark desire and chilled sheets? Of heated skin and pleased pain?

There was a subtle tensing of his body. He tucked his hands in his pockets, straightening.

"Anything else you've been researching?" he asked.

"I've been attempting to find more information on the Venus statue."



"Don't bother," he said. "I've already searched, and I suspect my father has taken all of the available books for his own use."

"Do you think you could get them back? I think—" she hesitated. Draco said they were a team. He said they could find out everything together, and he wouldn't stop her pursuit. "I don't think I've been told the truth about what's going on. There's something off, mostly with Dolohov. His motivation doesn't make sense to me."

Draco eyes went back to the runic books, eyebrows furrowing.

"There are—rumours about the curse. It's surprisingly hard to find true information, even for me." He met her gaze. "Getting the books from my father will be difficult, though not impossible. I suspect my father knows more than he tells me. And the fact he hides it from me... is concerning."

She pushed the book to him, sliding it across the desk.

"Help me translate this into modern text first."

He grabbed it and took a seat beside her, so close their knees almost touched. The heat of his body pressed against her as they both attempted to dissect the old texts.

Before they could get very far, Mipsy popped into the room.

"Master Draco, you have a visitor."

"Not your father again, I hope." Hermione frowned at the interruption.

"No, it is Mister Nott."

"I thought you said—"

Draco grinned, his white, straight teeth flashing in the low light of the library.

"I invited Theo."

"Theo!" Hermione exited her chair before he could say any more, running toward the fireplace.

---

After jumping into Theo's outstretched arms, Hermione spent all day with her brother. She showed him the manicured gardens and the peacocks.

"I don't know why Malfoy hates them, they are perfect gentlemen to me," she said, running her hand along Al's tiny head.

She brought him to the pristine art rooms next, with rows of marble statues of long-dead men, and introduced him to Septimus Malfoy who roped him into a long discussion about boggarts.

Toward the end, Hermione didn't want him to leave. Instead, they lay in bed, side by side, holding hands while staring at the ceiling.

"The last place I thought I'd ever be was in Malfoy's bed."

Theo grimaced, and Hermione shoved at his shoulder.

"It's my bed, really. I'm not sure where Draco sleeps."

"It's *Draco* now, is it?"

"Only when I'm not angry at him."

She let the silence cover her like a comfortable blanket before asking a question that had bothered her for a long time.

"Why did you help Malfoy win the Trials?"

"For you, of course. It certainly wasn't to appease that arse. After Titus— I'd never been so mad at him. You wanted just one thing, and he—" Theo bit his lip and looked away, and she thought she might see his eyes get a bit watery. He cried much more than she did, but it still didn't happen often. "You always seemed so— free after visiting Malfoy for your dates. So happy in a way I rarely see you. But I— I don't know if I made the right choice."

She didn't know how to feel about that.

"What do you mean?"

"Titus won't ever forgive me if he found out."

"Of course, he—"

"You don't understand. You haven't seen him. The night after your Trials, Tabitha came to get me, and I— well, after that, he practically begged me to come visit again, and when I did, he—" Theo sighed and squeezed her hand.

Hermione wondered if he knew about the ritual. For some reason, when she opened her mouth to ask him, the words congealed like glue in her mouth.

"What?" she asked instead.

"Never mind. I shouldn't bother you with this. You made your choice."

"*Theodore* Nott—don't you dare try to change the subject." Hermione hated to hear about Titus. Every day she missed him, as if she'd cut off her arm, leaving phantom pains. She found herself sometimes mid-laugh, twisting her head as if to tell him the joke, finding him gone.

It felt like grief. As if he had died. As if the night at the Stonehenge had been a burial, of both of them, laid out side by side.

How could someone be so integral to one's life in one moment, and the next— not?

She didn't regret her choice, but she didn't wish to wound Titus either, even if he'd lied to her.

All she knew was she couldn't look back. He'd raised her for ritual sacrifice. He'd planned to drug her and then take her virginity, no matter that he was convinced it would be to protect her from the others. And then he would have tried to convince her it was *gentle*.

The cold truth—maybe she might have believed him after a time. Maybe, in desperation for comfort, she would have forgiven him and fallen into his arms, let him soothe the ache. Because before now, she'd had no one and nothing else to compare him to.

"He's lonely, Hermione," Theo whispered. "I worry— Tabitha's taking care of him the best she can, forcing him to eat, and he manages to continue with work. Almost works too much now. Though I'm still angry with him— and I might always be a little angry with him— I find I don't have it in me to see him like this. No matter what, he's still my brother. I've considered moving in with him. For a time. At least, until he gets back on his feet."

Guilt ate at Hermione, remembering the haunted look he'd given her near the floo. The dark circles under his eyes, the uncharacteristic beard on his chin. Why did everything have to be so complicated? Why did she have to hurt at the idea of Titus struggling to eat?

"It's no matter," Theo said. "He'll get over it. I'm sure of it— he has to."

She could tell neither of them quite believed the lie.

---

They fell asleep and woke up to Draco shoving Theo out of the bed. He tumbled off the side and landed with a surprised humph.

"Cuddle time is over. Get home, Nott. It's practically dark. What are you doing sleeping all day?"

Theo rubbed his eyes and then rubbed the side of his wrist where he'd landed oddly.

"That hurt."

Hermione didn't bother to get up, enjoying the peaceful feeling inside her. It was the first time she'd felt it in a long time, as if the place she'd woken up in was now familiar and comforting.

To her surprise, Draco slipped in beside her, rolling slightly on top of her.

"Last warning, Theo. Things are about to get— explicit."

Draco leaned down and kissed her neck, and she gasped for real, shoving at his shoulders. But he only grinned and did it again, giving a soft nip to the skin near her clavicle.

"What do you mean?" Theo stood up and glanced at them, expression dropping in horror when he realised what Draco suggested. "Oh, Merlin! Gross. How do I get these images

out?" He covered his eyes and began walking to the door, completely missing and running into the wall.

"Ten seconds," Draco warned. "And you'll get to see how firm my naked arse is."

"Blimey, where's a Venomous Tentacula when you need one." He made a gagging sound.

"The door's to the left," Hermione reminded.

Her brother found the door handle, eyes still closed. Just to mess with him, she gave a fake moan.

Theo made a noise of distress as he ran out the door.

"Bye, Theo!" She yelled, laughing at his retreat as she heard him run down the staircase. She glanced up at Draco.

He wasn't laughing, staring at her mouth. The hard length of his erection pressed against her leg.

"Well— that was a little cruel," she said.

He rolled his eyes.

"You were the one who moaned, so don't pretend you're a better person." As if shaking himself from a trance, he peeled himself off her. "I'll invite your muggleborn friends next. It's been difficult to convince the Greengrasses, so it might take a few weeks. Night, Granger."

*Stay*, a part of her wished to say. Instead, she watched as he walked out of the room.

Afterwards, she placed a hand to her heated cheeks, wondering why she felt so shy now when she used to be so bold. Before the Trials, her physical needs had been almost like a game. Nothing serious. Now the stakes felt severe.

But still, remembering his hard length pressed against her leg, his liquid stare on her lips, she slipped down her hand, imagining his tongue and mouth, and for the first time since the Trials, she brought herself to completion.

---

For two weeks, they continued their normal routine. Draco would make his potions in the mornings. Sometimes, he'd leave for hours on some excursion or another.

In between was a blatant, slow seduction. It was almost maddening that he did nothing more than simple touches.

She remembered the bliss she felt as she rode his thigh, clinging to him, the taste of his skin, the sound of his strangled moan.

But there was an odd wall between them and only she could breach it. If it was up to him, he'd let this torture last for eternity.

Every time she opened her mouth to suggest that they try things, the words stuck in her throat, leaving her to live in agony.

She became so used to the routine that when the next muggleborn get together came up, she was shocked at how fast the time had passed.

---

"Julie went through her Trial at the beginning of December," Katie whispered in her ear after she entered an odd building built out of an old cathedral. It was five days before Christmas, so tinsel draped along evergreens. Candles and holly floated at intervals.

Hermione froze, realising a second too late what she'd heard. She ignored the background of chattering women.

"Did she go to Goyle?"

Katie shrugged.

"I wasn't supposed to hear. Flint was talking to Filibus through the floo, right before the—the *night*."

The words died between them. No one spoke about the ritual. It was a fleeting pain that flew between them, somehow binding. Hermione wished to dig her fingers into her soul and rip it out.

Draco had made hers as gentle as possible, and it still traumatised her. Most of the women weren't so lucky.

The thought of sweet Julie— no, she couldn't go down that route. But despite trying not to, her mind conjured horrid scenarios. Poor, bumbling Greg probably did his best to put her at ease. It sounded hypocritical, but Hermione hoped her friend had been completely unconscious.

Did Lestrangle watch? Did she beg the man she'd called father for help?

"Did Flint attend?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, but I don't think Greg won, or else he'd have said. Marcus is being odd, unwilling to tell me details, even when I threatened to sleep in another room. It's— disturbing."

"She should be here."

Hermione looked around. This event was meant to socialise them, but she'd heard some masters resisted the tradition, keeping their breeders locked away.

"We'll see her tonight. They always bring the new girls to their first party." Katie reached out and grabbed her hand, squeezing it. "Let's not worry too much, yeah?"

Without the galleon, she had no way to know Julie's emotional state. Katie had managed to keep hers, smuggled in with the stuff the Goyles brought over.

"Check your galleon tonight," she told Katie.

---

Hermione adjusted the hemline of her dress, still much more scandalous than she was used to, absent the sheer overlay of the last dress. She wore her hair down with curls, besides a golden butterfly hairpin comb of Draco's mothers.

Her nerves stretched thin. She wanted nothing to do with the party, wishing to stay at the manor, but she needed to see Julie. Needed to see she was okay.

Draco walked inside the room, adjusting his tie, stopping a moment to stare at her in appreciation.

"The punch will be safe this time. Travers is hosting and wants to impress the old guard. Dolohov and Walter Filibus might show up, so everyone will be on their best behaviour. Though I'm not taking any chances. Any alcohol you drink tonight will come from our own stores."

His promise did nothing to quiet the turmoil in her mind.

The thought of seeing Dolohov again, absent the fire and the stars— Hermione shivered. No, she wouldn't let him get to her.

Something felt wrong, deep in the fabric of the universe. Hermione couldn't shake it. Maybe it was the odd silence around Julie's trials.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked.

She'd interrogated him about Julie the minute she'd gotten back from the muggleborn luncheon. He looked sincere when he said he knew nothing besides the rumour it had occurred. He hadn't been sure of the details, beyond the fact his Aunt Bella had been furious at something, and it wasn't enough information to feel confident to tell her.

"I'm fine. Let's go."

---

Like before, they landed right outside an old muggle church Travers had retrofitted into a wizarding residence. Large stained glass windows showcasing celestial beings loomed over them. A man with a bloody, thorny crown hanging on a cross stared down at her alongside angels with powerful spread wings.

Travers was among the purebloods who'd benefited after the curse. Draco told her he helped organise production of food. This residence had been gifted to him by the ministry. Titus called men like him *new wealth* with an edge of derision.

She remembered entering a church once with her grandmother. Long wooden benches had stretched across the expanse of the room. Her dress had been itchy, and she'd accidentally fallen asleep.

Titus had always disparaged muggle religions, often making jokes about muggle stupidity. To be fair, he thought the same of the old gods that wizards used to worship.

But Hermione found the church beautiful in a way she couldn't define. She'd read the histories, the centuries of war, the crimes and the cruelty that humans enacted in the name of their gods. But something about the desperate hope for *more* than this existence tugged on her heart. Despite the many atrocities, muggles did good deeds for their gods too.

When they entered the building, the voices of the purebloods echoed around, the music bouncing against the walls. Despite the noise, an eerie disquiet washed over her. It felt wrong to be in the sanctuary, as if the ghosts of muggles lingered. Did they think of her as a traitor for dining among the men responsible for their demise?

The muggle religions had been outlawed, and any person found worshipping could be fined or given a short prison sentence. "Their gods have caused enough trouble", Titus had told her once.

But walking into the open hall, filled with women in red and blue and green, all on the arms of pureblood men— laughing, drinking— her past came back. The church she'd visited as a child had been different, but much the same. She remembered her grandmother chiding her to be quiet, pinching her knee for giggling. The hymns had echoed much like the laughter did now. There was a reverence to the moment, her grandmother's head bowed, hands clasped, pleading for something.

Had the curse happened yet? Had the starvation begun? Had the wizards revealed themselves?

She tried to order the events in her mind, cobbling together what she'd been told with her memories, but both had holes.

People watched them as they passed, but the noise level remained the same. Titus sat off in a corner, Dolohov next to him, along with Walter Filibus. They were deep in discussion, but his head snapped up when he saw her.

She hated seeing him here, reminding her of all the years of lies he'd told her. She transferred her attention elsewhere, pressing closer to Draco.

Hermione almost paused when she saw the stage. Muggle women were in the middle of a dance, somehow more scantily clad than the other women. And there, right in the center, twirling with the others, swaying and running her hands through her hair, was the muggle woman Titus brought to the study.

After a sensual turn, their eyes met. Without missing a beat, the woman gave her a taunting wink and twisted her hips back and forth in a sensual way.

Why were muggles here in the first place? At least, she assumed they were muggles, since they wore golden skirts that shimmered under the fractured light.

Hermione curled her lip, still not liking the woman much, ignoring the stage as much as possible. Draco placed a firm, warm hand on the middle of her back as they arrived at the table with Zala, Thorfinn, Katie and Flint.

She almost gave a greeting, but Katie's hand shot up and wrapped around her wrist. "Bloody hell— look."

Hermione stared down at her outfit in confusion, wondering what her exclamation was for, but Katie was looking toward the entrance.

Hermione turned, and a gasp ripped from her throat. If it wasn't for Draco's steadying hand, she might have collapsed to the floor.

At the front door, Julie stood in a pretty red dress, clinging tight to her body. She had her hands clasped before her, twisting in an anxious manner, head bowed to the floor.

Blaise Zabini stood behind Julie, a hand clasping the back of her neck in a possessive hold.

"Zabini won her?" She heard Katie whisper furiously to Flint.

"He wasn't supposed to," Flint answered in a defensive tone. "They only added Zabini because they thought it impossible for him to win with severed fingers. He almost killed Greg."

Hermione's vision darkened. Katie knew a little about Zabini, enough to understand he wasn't a good person. But Hermione hadn't told her everything. The way Zabini had backed her into the bookcase, threatening to fuck every part of her. How he'd promised to sell her to someone like Rosier.

Draco's hand tightened along her waist, fingers curling into the side of her hip as if to anchor her.

The horror in her mind transferred into a burning heat that roared through her. The wine in the goblets on the table bubbled from her accidental magic— something that hadn't happened in years.

"Tell me right now you didn't know anything about this," she hissed under her breath. "If you lie to me, I'll never trust you again."

"I didn't know," Draco whispered back, eyes on Julie and Blaise as if he didn't like what he saw either. "Until my father dies, I'm not allowed into the inner circle. I'd heard something unexpected happened, though I wasn't sure if it was Julie's Trials. My Aunt Bella was in a rage, and father cautioned Rodolphus to find a way to calm her. Dolohov was involved in some way. That's all I heard. I didn't want to tell you until I knew for sure."

"And do you think Zabini is— hurting her?"

Draco grimaced. "He wouldn't dare. My Aunt Bella would have his head if Julie wasn't treated right. I'm sure Rodolphus is checking up on her."



His assurance did nothing to stem the shock. Julie was supposed to go to sweet, blumpling Greg. They were supposed to have tons of little Goyle babies and live by the sea.

She almost stepped toward Julie, intending to rip Blaise's hand off her neck, but Draco held her tight and whispered in her ear. "Not now."

Against every cell in her body, she managed to follow Draco's soft tug on her waist and sink into his lap as they both sat. She met Katie's eyes, and something passed between them.

"It was black," Katie mouthed.

The galleon.

Blaise was getting around the edict to treat Julie well. What else would explain the colour?

---

Hermione kept her eyes trained on Julie for hours, until her friend finally managed to free herself from Zabini, travelling in the direction of the loo.

"I need to relieve myself," Hermione said.

Draco studied her.

"I'll go with you," he said.

"No, I'll take Katie. It's just around the corner. I can see it from here."

Draco frowned but gave a nod of acceptance at the added person.

"Right there and back," he warned. "No detours. I'll come looking if you're gone longer than necessary."

Katie didn't need to be asked. She had been examining Julie's exit. By her expression, she knew both of them had the same idea.

They needed to talk to their friend in privacy, and this might be their only opportunity.

She stood up and clenched her fists as she stomped her way to the bathroom. Katie trailed behind her, struggling to keep up as they turned into the corridor. It was the first door to their left, slightly out of view from the main sanctuary.

She caught up to Julie just in time. As her friend tried to shut the door, Hermione blocked it with her foot, shoving herself inside the small room.

Katie entered behind her, and Hermione slammed the door, locking them all inside together.

It was a small powder room, with a pedestal sink and a single toilet. It gave them little room to move, but she didn't need the space.

"Hermione?" Julie trembled hard, eyes wide. "Katie?" There were no extra words needed. When Hermione reached out to hug her, Julie began to cry and fell into her outstretched arms. Her bones felt like a bird's, as if they'd crush if she squeezed too hard. Hermione cradled Julie against her chest as she sobbed— an ugly cry, filled with sharp anguish.

Katie sniffled behind her, reaching out to clasp Julie's thin hand for extra comfort.

Hermione didn't bother asking if she was okay.

Of course, she wasn't.

Julie had expected to be given to a person she could love, and Blaise was a human mantichora, crooning a taunt before snapping its jaws closed on its prey.

"Tell me everything," Hermione said after a while.

"There's nothing to tell." Her voice was as delicate as her body. Somehow she seemed impossibly smaller than before, and she'd always been tiny.

Hermione shook her head.

"You don't have to lie to me."

Julie began to sniff again.

"He—I tried to fight him," she answered, and Hermione looked toward the ceiling, attempting to stay strong for her friend. "I promise I did."

"There was nothing you could do."

"But it only makes him worse. And when I decide to give in to him, he hurts me in other ways— in ways I never thought—"

Julie cut herself off with a deep sob. The mention of pain made Hermione's eyes narrow.

Examining Julie's skin, she spotted a concealment charm. It shimmered under the artificial light just enough to give it away. And then she found another and another and another. Her arms were covered in them.

She didn't need to reveal the bruises to know they were there.

"Fuck," Hermione said, feeling her voice catch. She felt like crying. "How is he hiding this from your father—"

Julie shrank away from her, curling in on herself against the wall near the loo, holding her stomach.

"Julie—"

"No, please don't. I—let's pretend—"

"I'm not going to pretend! What about your father—"

"Father asked for an exchange. As long as Zabini didn't injure me too bad, mum would never need to know— about either of them." After she said it, Julie leaned over the loo and retched. Nothing came out as she grasped the sides, groaning lowly.

"What do you mean—" Hermione abruptly stopped her sentence with an insidious understanding. A chill overcame her. Hermione swayed and placed a hand against the wall. "No, he wouldn't— Bellatrix— he calls you his—"

Hermione felt as ill as Julie, placing her hand over her lips. Rodolphus *did* check on Julie. But when he'd found her mistreated, instead of helping the girl he called daughter, he'd made a deal.

"Rodolphus raped you."

"Bloody hell." Katie shoved around Hermione to hold back Julie's hair, rubbing on her back, while Hermione stood, paralyzed. "Oh, Julie..."

"He—he told me he'd always fantasised about coming into my bedroom." Julie placed a dainty hand to her forehead, shiny with perspiration. "I don't know if I can survive this any longer."

"Let me tell your mum," Hermione said.

"No!" Julie wiped her mouth and stood up on shaking legs. "She'll kill father. And maybe Blaise too."

Hermione wished Julie would stop calling that monster her father. A father wouldn't rape his daughter.

"That doesn't sound bad to me."

"But she'd go to Azkaban. I can't stand the thought."

The phantom tears Hermione wished to shed crystallised and became scalding droplets of fire leaking through her.

"Well, I think she—"

A knock on the door interrupted them.

"It's occupied," Hermione said through clenched teeth, hoping whoever it was would give up and find another bathroom.

"I think I've given you more than enough time." Blaise's voice answered from the other side. Tone light with amusement. The words crawled down Hermione's spine. "Now open the door, house pet. I've come to retrieve my property."

"Absolutely not," Hermione said back. Nothing could compel her to open the door and hand Julie back to that monster. Not after what she'd learned.

"Just do as he says," Julie pleaded with a hand on her arm. "He'll punish me otherwise."

"You see how well I've trained her." Zabini gave a grating laugh. "So obedient and sweet. She does anything I tell her to. Fuck, maybe I'll even show you. Julie, sweetheart, open the door. My cock is aching, and I'm craving that tight little arse again. This time I want you on your hands and knees like the dog you are. Come on, show your mudblood friend how a true house pet behaves toward her master."

Blaise's words weren't an idle threat. If she opened the door, he'd probably bring Julie down the corridor and rape her, and Hermione would either have to walk away or watch the torture. The last party showed her that no one would stop it or care, besides urging them to keep it semi-private for the sake of the old guard.

She glanced back at Julie's tear-stained face, at the concealment charms.

In response, Hermione summoned the magic inside her, bringing it to her hands, tendrils of it zipping up her spine. Her mind replayed the horror that Julie went through. The torture, the rape. What it must have felt like for the man she called father to undress and touch her, to violate her in a way a father never should.

No, Hermione couldn't hand Julie over to torture. Her gentle, sweet, optimistic friend.

She *wouldn't*.

Her rage coalesced into a dark, seething mass. She carried the heavy weight of it, made of the pain of all the women she'd ever known, until Hermione realised that she only had two choices.

She could bend and bow to the force.

Or she could crack and obey her impulse.

Hermione welcomed the darkness like a friend. An irreversible snapping of her soul. The heavy mass of pain inside her mind fractured and assimilated into her brain— a monster in the shadows of her grey matter. It grinned, as if it had waited her whole life to be given the reins, buried under civility. A savage thing, made of raw rage.

"What are you doing?" Katie whispered, sensing a shift in her composure.

"Something I should have done ages ago."

Zabini wasn't the only beast with sharp teeth.

Hermione yanked open the door. Julie attempted to grab her hand, but she was beyond reasoning. She was a vampire now, craving fresh blood. A werewolf under the full moon. Nothing could stop her transformation.

Zabini waited right outside and when he saw her, gave a sly grin, standing casually, as if he'd won some battle. Not afraid like he should be.

She raised her wrists, and he laughed.

"Step aside, house pet. You wouldn't want me to tell them how unruly you are." He reached out to grab Julie, confident in his safety and superiority.

*Disarm first*, Titus' voice spoke in her mind, made from years of watching him train.

"Expelliarmus!"

His wand hurtled down the hall, but she didn't give him the time to accio it back.

"No—" Katie began to shout behind her, finally understanding. But Hermione was beyond listening.

A violent twist of her wrist.

"Crucio!"

Every sliver of her existence meant the word.

Hermione's soul ripped, but she grit her teeth through the pain, holding the curse.

Zabini collapsed to the floor, writhing around. She drank in his screams, watching every wretched contortion of agony with satisfaction.

"How does it feel?" She said, voice steady.

Hermione didn't see the commotion in the distance, and if she hadn't been so focused on the curse, she would have noticed the absence of music. A few seconds later, the unforgivable proved too much to hold and dissipated.

But she was far from finished.

"How does it feel to be powerless?"

When he lifted his head to snarl at her, she picked his body up and slammed him down on the ground. One of his bones cracked with a crunch.

"How does it feel to be unable to stop the pain?"

With another twist of her wrist, she threw him against the wall, sticking him to it. She attempted to squeeze his head as she'd done the vases, willing his head to explode. His nose and mouth bled, and he screamed. But her magic already felt depleted, as if scraping the bottom of a bowl.

Hermione didn't care that overextending herself might kill her. If it saved her friend a day of pain, then it would be worth it. She only had the capacity for one more spell, so she'd make it

count.

He trembled as she walked forward.

"You'll regret this," he sputtered. "I'm going—"

"Dead men can't do anything."

She got the chance to see his delicious fear, eyes widened, mouth open in a silent scream.

Avada Kedavra rested on the tip of her tongue.

But before she completed the curse, she collapsed to the floor, arms trapped to her side.

A familiar set of dragon hide boots paused beside her, and she tilted her face up to see Titus looking down with a hard expression. A magic lasso wrapped firmly around her waist, trapping her wrists to her side. Dolohov was at his back with his wand trained on her, and not on the cretin who lay crumpled on the ground near her. As if *she* was the dangerous one.

Titus tugged her up with magic, so she floated in front of him. Her head lulled with exhaustion.

"What have you done?" Titus said through clenched teeth. "Did he attack you?"

"He hurt Julie."

Titus scanned the scene, eyes landing on her friends, huddled in the doorway, both shivering and holding each other. And then his stare went back to her, as if to solve a puzzle.

"You used an unforgivable... wandless." There was a note of shock in his voice. "You attempted to *kill* him."

"Such a pity I didn't," she whispered, head fuzzy, finding it hard to stay awake.

At that moment, Draco barreled around the corner and hurtled to a stop. "What the bloody fuck happened?"

There was only enough time to sense the wound in her soul, lacerated from the dark magic. Pure agony drowned her.

And then, Hermione's vision went dark.

---

Art by [Frau Blucher](#)



[Hermione](#) by Ivmaruva!!

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: references to rape and domestic violence

## Chapter 32: The Cost of Freedom

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Apashe- "Behind My Eyes" (ft. LIA)

I wrote a (rare for me) one-shot for the Teratophilia fest called Tender Flesh. Draco is a Minotaur and chases Hermione through a labyrinth.

I figured out the glitch for Ivmaruva's Hermione art. I placed it at the bottom of Chapter 16, because I feel like it captures her innocence very well. Go check it out if you haven't already!

As always, a big thank you to MyPrivateInsanity!

Trigger Warning at the bottom (it's a mild one)

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

"Drink, Sprite." The scent of cinnamon surrounded her, and she sank into the warmth it provided. But something seemed off. Wrong. Out of place.

A heart thumped behind her ear, and she clutched at the fabric of the shirt. "It hurts."

"I know. The potion will help."

She cracked her eyes open to find herself cradled in Titus' arms.

He placed a cold vial against her lips. A single drop of liquid slipped past and numbed her skin where it spilled.

"Drink," he ordered again.

This time she did as he asked, and the potion slid down her throat. She coughed, but managed to swallow most of it. It numbed her mouth, but within moments, the pain lessened. Another groan ripped from her, this time from sharp relief.

"Where am I?" A blanket of darkness surrounded her. The more she kept her eyes open, the better they adjusted. A bolt of light hit his face, illuminating a blue eye as he stared down in concern, still cradling her close to his chest.

"In a ministry cell."

It took a moment for her to remember the party.

Julie.



Blaise.

Titus had *arrested* her.

"Put me down," she said.

He sighed but did as she asked. Getting up, he turned and placed her on the hard bed he'd been sitting on. Without a blanket, she shivered on the thin mattress in the chilly, damp air—if it could even be called a mattress, pockmarked with odd stains and smelling of mould.

Seeing her discomfort, Titus cast a warming charm, and Hermione had to bite her tongue to stop the instinct to say thank you.

Hermione just wanted to sleep. Something in her soul had rearranged, as if she'd lost a precious and irreplaceable piece of herself. Curling into a tight ball, knees to her stomach, she studied her surroundings. There didn't seem to be anything else in the cell, besides a metal sink and a toilet, both securely attached to the ground. There were no walls, just bars so she could peer inside other empty cells.

"Where is everyone?"

"I managed to get you a more private setting." Titus sat on the edge of the mattress and brushed the curls off her face. "I didn't want you in the vicinity of the criminals."

"Hm, you gave me such a beautiful room. Thanks ever so."

She'd meant it to be cutting, but his lips twitched.

"Save your sarcasm for when you're rested." He dug his hand into her curls and caressed her cheekbone with his thumb. "The first unforgiveable is always the most painful, but it's only a small cut. Your soul will heal."

"Why am I so tired?"

"You overextended your magic, causing your body to start to shut down. You've already spent the night at St. Mungos with strict orders to finish your potions."

Wandless magic tended to be more powerful, but it rushed out quicker in an uncontrolled wave. A wand slowed it down, protecting the caster's energy levels.

The hand cradling her face so tenderly made her angry—that he would have the audacity to show affection after stopping her from exacting her revenge and then *arresting* her. He'd even put her in a bloody prison cell! Not to mention everything else he'd done. She wanted to slap his hand away, but her exhaustion ran too deep. His touch felt good on her heated forehead. Was she feverish?

"What's going to happen to me?"

"We'll worry about that tomorrow. Try to sleep off the side effects for now."

The pull of sleep was too strong to resist, and she quickly succumbed to its lullaby.

---

Later in the night, a large body curled up beside her, pulling her close and wrapping a strong arm around her. The weight soothed whatever pain lingered inside her soul.

"I'm so furious with you," a voice whispered in her ear. "None of this would have ever happened if you'd have been with me. No—" he paused, changing his mind. "I'm not going to blame you— it's my fault for allowing you to win. I should have followed my instincts and not tried to placate you." A soft warmth pressed on her forehead. "Dark magic isn't something to do on a whim. Your soul is too pure for it, Sprite."

Sprite? No, that wasn't right. It was supposed to be Granger.

The hand trailed down her spine in a soothing motion. "You're too reckless for your own good."

"Draco?"

A forceful breath billowed her hair. The fingers dropped off her spine and curled into a fist near her hip.

After a few moments, he detangled himself from her, despite her attempts to keep him close, still seeking comfort.

"Don't leave me," she begged.

The person ignored her and walked to the door, but hesitated before exiting. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against the hard metal, taking deep breaths as if to calm down.

Her brain sorted itself out enough to realise the man hadn't been Draco.

"Titus?" The potion he'd given her only made her exhaustion and mental confusion worse.

He straightened and opened the door without looking at her.

A man in an auror uniform stood right outside, and Titus grabbed him by the collar, pulling him close, until he stood on his tiptoes, so they were eye to eye.

"No one visits her without my permission," Titus threatened. "Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"If she asks for me, come get me right away."

"Yes sir."

"Disobey any of these orders, and you won't like the consequences."

"Yes sir," the other man answered, looking like he might piss his pants in fear.

Titus set the man down again, resembling a giant next to the auror. Bigger than the space trying to contain him.

Or maybe this was all a hallucination.

Right before walking out of her cell, Titus turned his head and met her stare. "I need to think."

Hermione didn't answer, and he didn't give any further explanation as he fled. She listened until the shuffle of his boots faded into the dark.

---

Shortly after waking, having lost her notion of time, the auror outside her cell opened the door. He flicked on the overhead light, and she blinked in discomfort at the sudden change.

"Stand up," he ordered. "No sudden movements and hold out your wrists."

Hermione played with the idea of resistance, but she complied. The grey shackles snapped as they fastened. Made of magically reinforced steel, they didn't smother her magic, but they did make it hard to move, which hindered her ability to cast.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I'm not allowed to say."

Titus had never returned, and she didn't know if that relieved her or made her more wary.

The auror grabbed her upper arm and pulled her in front of him. Despite his size, she felt the strength behind the touch and the tip of his wand at the base of her spine.

The auror led her through a maze of corridors she'd never been into. After opening a random door, he pushed her into a white room so bright it almost blinded her, which only housed a table and two chairs that faced each other.

An interrogation.

Her nerves bunched in her stomach.

After directing her to a metal chair and forcing her down, the auror stood off to the side and waited.

The bright walls reflected off the shiny metal table. It gave her a sharp headache, only relieved when she shut her eyes tight and placed her forehead in her hands, linked together on the table in front of her.

In her boredom, she reviewed the events that led to her sitting in the ministry awaiting interrogation.

Hermione didn't feel guilty for cursing Blaise. If she could, she'd do it again. Her only regret was not finishing the job.

Avada Kedavra— and she would have meant it. Though given her state of severe exhaustion, it might have killed her too.

She wondered what the purebloods would have done then?

The door opened, tearing her from her memories, and a stunning woman walked inside.

She had light brown skin and a perfect crown of curls, framing killer cheekbones. Amber eyes glowed under the light. An aquiline nose offset features almost perfect. Bright white strands intermixed into the woman's dark hair. Hermione sat up fully, wondering who she was.

But Hermione didn't have to wonder for long. The woman pointed a finger at her— blood red nails with a diamond embedded in each tip.

"Twice now you've harmed my son. I should tear out your tongue. What's the use for a mudblood to speak? I'm not sure why we allow vermin like you to keep the ability."

Now, Hermione saw the resemblance— the arresting eyes, the cheekbones cut like a sculpture. The violent personality. Blaise Zabini may be a monster, but he favoured his stunning mother.

"You're not allowed in here," the auror said, as if shaking off a trance.

The woman twisted, hair flying, and glared at him, holding eye contact longer than normal.

"Do be quiet and stay out of my way," the woman's voice sounded like silk.

At the command, he clicked his jaw closed and returned to his previous position, eyes glazed.

The hair on the back of Hermione's neck prickled.

The longer Hermione looked at Blaise's mum, the more her whole appearance seemed off— unnaturally smooth skin, eyes too shiny under the light, a sway to the way she walked.

A veela— she realised. Or at least, part veela. The odd white streaks of hair against the pitch black curls gave her away. The charm that Veelas produced worked best on men, but even Hermione found it hard to look away from the vision before her, luring in her prey.

It made sense now why his mother held sway over a few of the powerful men in the government.

With the guard out of the way, Zabini's mother transferred her attention to Hermione and cocked her head.

"They told me not to touch you, but you know the saying— it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Besides, it's just your tongue. Maybe I'll even cook it up and serve it as a nice little dinner. I'll make that ungrateful whore— hm, what was her name? Jenny?"

"Julie," Hermione corrected through clenched teeth.

"Yes, I'll serve it to Jenny and ask her how silence tastes."

The familiar rage vibrated under Hermione's skin, helping her to focus. It was hard to concentrate in the woman's presence, but not impossible.

"Touch me." Hermione raised her wrists. "And I'll demonstrate how I almost killed your son." Casting might be difficult, but she'd try her best.

"You're a feral thing. I wonder if you'll still be able to scream when it's gone. You should—"

The door opened, interrupting her. Blinking her eyes, Hermione realised the woman was closer than she thought, within arms' length. She'd been so distracted, staring at her face, she hadn't even noticed her move.

A dangerous veela trick, Hermione realised.

"What are you doing here, Nera?" Titus' hard voice cut a path through them, bringing her back to focus. "Filibus ordered you to stay away from this."

Zabini's mother twisted on the sharp points of her heels. Her dress shimmered under the bright light, slicked against her wicked curves. She smirked, and it was as sharp as a knife.

Titus walked to the table in his auror uniform, eyes trained on Nera.

"Allow me to talk to her," her voice sounded like honey. "I promise to get all the answers you need."

It was meant to entice, but Titus only scowled back.

"Your tricks won't work on me. I take the correct potions." Titus tugged out a chair. "Now get out. You're impeding an auror investigation."

"I demand to oversee," she hissed back. "Everyone knows you are deep in her treacherous little cunt. What have you traded to be the one to *interrogate* her?"

Titus' expression turned even colder.

"Say another word, and I will no longer ask in a civil way." He pulled out his curved wand and placed it near him. "Given *I* was the one who removed your son's fingers, you should understand that I'm serious. I've been tasked with questioning her, and that does not include you."

Nera's face transformed, exposing the creature resting beneath. Unlike the guard, Titus did not crack.

"I'll speak to Filibus about this corruption."

"Please do."

Nera seemed as if she wanted to tear Titus apart with her bare hands, but she gave a scowl to Hermione.

"Next time, he won't be able to save you, *house pet*." She dragged a nail along the surface of the table as she walked toward the door, causing a horrific screech.

Hermione pressed her lips together until the woman and the guard—still in a daze— exited the room, leaving her alone with Titus.

Hermione suspected there might be some truth to Nera's words. Titus must have called in a favour to interrogate her without witnesses. Or maybe now he owed a favour.

The full force of his glare turned to her, showing his displeasure. He dug in his pocket and took out a parchment and a quill. After he smoothed out the parchment, he charmed the quill to stand on its own, able to write down verbal notes on command. Now ready to proceed, he sank down in the opposite metal chair.

"I will start by saying how stupid your actions were." His voice was ragged, as if he had used it too much. "I've spent many hours arguing on your behalf."

"With Dolohov?"

A sharp nod answered her. "You should know he suggested that you be put down."

"Put me down?" Hermione snapped her head up. "Like execution?"

Titus took off his black gloves, one after the other, leaving his hands bare. He ran one over his face and through his hair.

"Between Lucius and me, we talked him down to a more tolerable punishment." His hard stare softened, staring at her. She wondered if her fear showed, face paling. "Don't worry, I wouldn't have let him kill you. There are plenty of options besides death, but you are on thin ice in your current circumstance."

She didn't know what he meant.

"Am I being taken from Draco?"

The thought hadn't occurred to her, but now that it did, the dread entered her. Drowned her. She placed a hand to her chest, feeling like she might hyperventilate.

"Lucius still holds plenty of power," Titus said slowly. "But this cost him a lot. Unfortunately, Draco gets to keep you— for now."

Her nervous system calmed down, and Titus gave her time to absorb the news.

"But you still need to interrogate me?" Hermione asked, finally able to breathe.

"I do, mostly for my own answers." He flicked his wand, and the quill trembled, ready to mark his questions. Hermione swallowed hard. "I'll need to know where you learned the

spells. Along with that, you need to vow you'll never attack Zabini or use the unforgivables again."

Another unbreakable vow. One that would magically defang her forever.

"I refuse."

Titus snorted and groaned, still rubbing his face with his hand. She hated that he treated it like a joke. "Maybe you are a Gryffindor. No self-preservation." And then his eyes narrowed. "Or maybe I've protected you too long from your own mistakes."

"Zabini needs to know that if he hurts Julie, there will be retribution. I want him terrified to even breathe around me. I refuse to place myself in a magical contract that prevents that."

The quill still scratched along as she spoke, the only sound in the room, recording everything she said. Until Titus reached over, picked up the quill, snapped it in two, and threw it over his shoulder. Then he set the parchment on fire and let it burn near him, while he glowered at her.

"This is no longer funny, Sprite."

"I'm not joking."

"I was the one who thought up the vow, knowing how much your magic means to you. Either take the vow, or they'll place you in obsidian."

"Then I choose to lose my magic. I'm sure I could still kill him by muggle means."

A beat of silence, and then Titus barked out a laugh. He stared at the ceiling, as if asking a deity for patience. When he met her eyes again, he still wore a smile.

"Merlin, I miss you."

Hermione shifted in her seat in discomfort at the way he looked at her then, as if she made his world and broke it at the same time.

"He's *raping* Julie, beating her... selling her." It was hard to get the words out without her voice cracking. "How could anyone stand aside and let that happen?"

Titus picked up his wand and tapped a beat on the table, as if thinking.

"If you want, I could have a talk with him. Or I could ask the ministry to put protection charms on her, especially when she's pregnant. It's illegal to—"

"I want you to take her from him. You're an auror. You could—"

Titus slammed his fist on the table.

"Stop it, Hermione. I know you aren't that naive. I may have some power, but I can't just—"

"That's a load of bollocks!" Hermione stood up, bracing her shackled hands on the table, leaning over it. "I heard what you offered Malfoy. Don't lie to me about what you can do."

The power to make people disappear, he'd said. A seat on the wizengamot. Surely, that was more expensive than a Zabini, even if he was the last one. Even if his mother was a veela with connections to powerful men.

In answer, Titus stood, chair legs screeching and matched her stance, leaning over close to her.

"Those were things I was willing to risk for *you*. If you were mine, maybe I'd consider helping your friend. But you're not. You left me on purpose, so why the fuck should I do anything for you?"

Titus returned to his chair and crossed his arms along his chest. She'd forgotten how physically imposing he was. In this small room, he seemed to take up most of the space. His blue eyes glowed right beside the blindingly light walls.

Hermione took several panting breaths, attempting to control herself, and she sat. His response broke her heart. He could be so much better, so much braver.

"Tabitha once told me that as a boy you wanted to be a dragon knight," her voice cracked again. "You wanted to save maidens from evil men. Zabini is that evil man, Titus. You could —"

"That boy died with my parents." Once again, his stare did not meet her eyes. "He was young and stupid. He didn't know what evil was yet. But as a man, I now understand I can't save everyone. A man needs to choose the people he can protect, and he needs to forget the rest." Titus pinched the bridge of his nose. "But, despite that knowledge and everything inside me telling me not to, I'm willing to offer a deal. Because the way you're looking at me is intolerable."

"A deal? I can't believe—"

"It's not what you're thinking. Come to dinner at the manor, and we'll discuss it there."

Hermione didn't dissect the instant recoil in her gut at the thought of even visiting Nott manor again.

"I won't be allowed."

"Allowed? I thought Malfoy never denied you anything. If that's true, then he should have no problem with you stopping by to visit. Tabitha misses you dearly and so does Bitty. I even think Eddy has shed a tear or two. And you can use the opportunity to gather your belongings."

It felt like a trap.

"I'm not stepping back inside your manor."



"My manor? It was your home too."

"It was my prison."

Titus jolted in his seat, as if she had just cursed him.

"Fuck Hermione, you almost killed a pureblood. If it wasn't for Lucius and me, you might be sitting in Azkaban right now. I think you'd quickly change your definition of a prison."

She'd been rash with Blaise. She could admit that. But she'd been backed into a corner by a beast. Her friend would have been hurt in front of her if she hadn't acted *right then*. She'd rather be impulsive than a coward.

"He—"

"And say you had killed Zabini? What then? Who would she have gone to next? These are things you need to figure out before you shed blood."

True, when she finally murdered Blaise— and she would— she'd be much slyer about it.

"Did you get everything you needed for your *interrogation*?" she asked. "Because I'll never agree to a vow."

His eyes flicked over her. Absent of the glare, she saw the pain, the longing. And then they sharpened, as if ripping into her mind.

"No, but I suspect your knowledge of the unforgiveables came from the same source you learned the duelling spells; therefore, it was my fault— my *leniency*— that you acquired this knowledge." He stood up and pocketed his wand. The beginnings of occluding deadened his expression. "So here's my last warning—If you ever manage to use an unforgivable again, I will no longer be *lenient*."

He tore his eyes from her and let the warning linger between them as he made his way to the door and walked out, leaving her alone in the bright white room.

---

Dolohov came in much later. He carried a bag by his side that jangled when dropped near the table. After sitting, he stared at her until, no matter how hard she tried, she squirmed in her seat in discomfort.

Her instinct screamed with the danger of being alone in this man's presence.

"Did you know that humans domesticated dogs over thirty thousand years ago?" he asked in a bored voice.

Hermione waited, wondering if it was a rhetorical question.

"I did not."

"Humans took a wolf— a predator— and enticed it to behave. Perform tricks for mere scraps of sustenance. After generations of selective breeding, they became perfect pets, providing a multitude of services. They revel in their submission to us. Do everything they can to please us, and they are perfect companions— until they bite." He pulled out his wand, made of a light brown wood. Several bulbous shapes interrupted what would have been a straight, rigid length. "Tell me, Hermione, what should a master do with an aggressive dog?"

"Perhaps they have a reason to bite."

Dolohov grinned. He gave a flick of his wand, and a shadow exited the tip. It twirled across the table and onto the floor, materialising into a giant black dog with red eyes that stood right next to her.

She froze, amazed at the level of magic.

"In some ways, this is opposite of a patronus," he explained. "Born of hate, and able to be manipulated into any shape I will it to be."

She'd never seen or read anything like it. In a normal circumstance, she'd attempt to discover everything about it.

But the dog growled, and her instincts prickled. It prowled forward, circling her legs. The corporal shadow sparked her nerves with the barest touch, almost painful. She did her best to ignore it.

"Much like Titus, I enjoy my pets lively." Dolohov continued. "A little bark. A playful snarl. But a truly dangerous dog no longer has a purpose. For the safety of the whole, it must be—" he seemed to be thinking. "Do help me with the correct word."

"Culled," Hermione provided, already knowing what he suggested.

The giant dog opened his mouth, closing its shadow teeth around her calf without biting. Her skin pricked with pain, and she did everything to stay still.

"You're such an intelligent pet," he mocked. "Unfortunately, with your particular *breed*, it can be a detrimental trait if not correctly managed." He reached down and grabbed the grey bag, placing it on the table with a heavy clang. "There are several methods to correct disobedience. If a dog likes to bite, it must first be muzzled and trained." Reaching in the bag, he took out the obsidian shackles. She knew they were coming, but she still flinched at the sight. "Do you know what these are?"

Hermione leaned back in her chair and didn't answer him.

"I think you do, so I don't need to explain what you're about to lose. Give me your wrist."

Hermione hesitated, but there wasn't an alternative. She extended her hands. Dolohov released the shackle on her right hand, calloused fingers pressing hard to her skin in a nauseating way, and replaced it with the obsidian, closing it with a sickening snap.

The effects were immediate. The familiar buzzing of magic right under her hand slipped away, rendering her as effective as a muggle.

"Your magic has always been a privilege, something that could have been taken away at any moment. I only regret that I didn't do it right after your Trials, especially since you proved to be so disappointing."

That was his true ire with her. He'd placed a lot of hope on her ritual, and he still hadn't forgiven her.

Dolohov reached for her other wrist. She grimaced, hating the sound created as he slid the shackle off, replacing it with the smothering sensation.

After shackling her completely, he sat back. Her eyes burned with unshed tears, and she was grateful she couldn't cry, if only to deny Dolohov what he wanted.

"Is that it?" she asked.

"Not quite."

He snapped his fingers.

A force constricted her lungs, leaving her unable to take in a breath. She grabbed at her throat, at her chest. She clawed at her skin, desperate for a drop of oxygen, afraid her lungs might collapse. She opened her mouth, panic drowning her, and then she tumbled out of her chair, landing hard against the tile.

The shadow dog snapped its jaw closed on her leg and shook its head. A silent scream exited her mouth as she attempted to kick it away, to no avail. There were no wounds and no blood, but the pain felt real. Slicing skin. Ripping tendons. Crunching bones.

Dolohov stood up slowly and wandered around, viewing her with apathy as she contorted in pain. Hermione always prided herself on her internal strength, but in that moment, she knew she'd do anything to breathe, for the elimination of pain. She'd promise and beg and humiliate herself.

*Please*, she wished to ask, trying to grab his boot, but he shoved her hand aside with the tip of the dragonhide and glared down at her coldly.

The torture continued, until she thought he might kill her. Until she feared the dog would rip her leg away.

A second snap of his fingers, and the constriction lifted. The dog disintegrated into smoky wisps. She gasped in a deep breath of air, and it hurt as it entered her lungs, her whole body trembling. She sobbed on the ground, still gasping, snot running down her nose, feeling like she might vomit.

"Such a pathetic creature." He reached down and grabbed the back of her neck, digging his hands into her skin. He lifted her and, with heavy force, slammed her face down on the table, smacking her forehead into the hard surface.

"From now on, you'll be an obedient little pet," he snarled. "All you're required to do is lay back, spread those pretty legs, and perform your duty. In return, you'll be fed and housed. Frankly, that's a better life than I think a filthy mudblood like you deserves." He leaned down near her ear. "So if you continue to bite the hand that feeds you, I'll show you what I'd wanted to do to your race of insects before the curse." He pressed harder and harder, until she thought her neck would snap. A single cry of pain escaped her mouth. As if that was the cue he waited for, he let up the pressure. "*Don't* become my problem."

He straightened and walked to the door, wiping his hands on his robe, as if touching her had disgusted him.

She waited a long time to move after he left, resting on the table to regain her breath, waiting for the pain to dissipate. Until, finally, she managed to sit up and rubbed her nose, staring at her shackles in loathing, hating the new weight dragging her to the ground. Hating the absence of magic.

It wasn't until much later that she realised something important about the whole interaction.

Dolohov had cast his magic nonverbally— most of it wandless.

---

A low-level ministry employee led her out of the room, hand grasping her upper arm. Draco waited at the floos, standing alongside Lucius. The elder Malfoy looked at her in undisguised disgust.

White blond hair. Icy grey eyes. Cold expression. Relief overwhelmed her at the sight, though her body still buzzed from the torture. It remained invisible, crawling along her nerves.

"You're far more trouble than you're worth." Lucius loomed over her. "I lost favour with two Wizengamot members today, because of your proclivity for trouble. Do a stunt like that again \_\_\_"

"Yes," she managed to rasp out, throat sore. "Dolohov was perfectly clear what would happen."

Lucius grit his teeth at her, but Draco placed a hand on his father's chest before he could respond, manoeuvring his way between them.

"Leave us. I'll punish her."

"You better. And I must remind you that part of the deal—"

"Absolute silence," Draco said. "Especially around certain insane family members. You've already told me three times."

Lucius continued to glare at her like she was some bug he considered squashing, but he nodded and turned.

Draco was occluding severely— that was the first thing she noticed as he grabbed her arm like the ministry employee had, except tighter. So tight his grip cut off the circulation.

He tugged, leading her to the floos. The main floor was emptier than usual. The men and women walking past were acting like they weren't paying attention, but she felt their eyes as he herded her forward.

"You're hurting—"

"Not a single word." His dark tone caused a tingle to zip down her spine, but his hold did loosen just a little.

They arrived at the floo. She stared at him, attempting to break through his walls as he grabbed onto the powder, throwing it into the cinders.

"Malfoy manor," he said and shoved her forward. She tumbled through, and he came after, landing in the formal sitting room with the silk yellow couches. Before she could do anything, he twisted her around and grabbed her under her chin with a hard hold, tugging her body close to his.

"What were you thinking?" He seethed. "Did you know Titus argued to take you back?"

She didn't know that, but she suspected it based on his warnings.

"I didn't—"

"And Dolohov wanted to *kill* you. I don't think you understand the gravity of what you just did."

Every single cell in her body stood on end as Draco leaned down to meet her eyes. He was still occluding, but by his words, she knew he was more than angry with her.

"I was protecting my friend."

"I don't fucking care!" His composure finally broke. Red spots splashed across his cheeks, blooming along his neck.

"She's your—" Hermione wasn't sure if he considered her a cousin or not.

"She's nothing to me. Father doesn't like Aunt Bella. Do you think he ever allowed me around them unsupervised? Do you think he sent me to their home for afternoon tea?"

"Well, she's important to me. If you care for me at all—"

"She's not worth losing you."

Hermione wanted to slap him for that, but she stopped herself.

"If this is your way of being the opposite of Titus, then you're failing. He'd try to convince me I was wrong for protecting my friend, just like you are. So go ahead and be like him."

His free hand grabbed a fistful of her hair, oddly gentle. The other hand tightened along her chin, and his lips came down as if to kiss her, but he stopped moments before contact.

Hermione felt dazed. On instinct, her own hands reached out, grabbing along his waist, feeling the tight muscles beneath the thin shirt.

"Maybe I am a little like him," he whispered against her lips. "Because the thought of you getting taken from me makes me— insane. I want to touch you. To be touched by you. I want to possess you in the way you possess me."

His face dropped to her neck, and he ghosted his lips on the skin below her chin. She gasped at the phantom contact. She could barely pay attention to his words, distracted by the tingle of nerves he left in the wake of soft lips just brushing toward her ear and up as he returned to her mouth, hovering over them. An unfulfilled promise. A demonstration of what he wanted.

"But no matter how much I wish to possess you, I refuse to have you as my fucking prisoner." He let go of her, leaving her stunned, and dug in his cloak, extracting an odd circle. He pressed it over one obsidian shackle and then the other and watched as each opened and clattered to the floor. Magic rushed back to her fingertips in glorious waves. "With me, you'll always be free."

"What is that?"

"The Blacks owned a universal key. It was my mother's and no one knows of it."

He risked a lot by doing this.

"Malfoy—" she reached her hand up by instinct. She wasn't sure what she'd intended, but he grabbed it in a tight hold before it touched his face.

"Don't," he said.

It felt like rejection, and she didn't stop and wonder at the way it constricted her chest just like Dolohov's curse.

"I'm—"

"I don't have a lot of control over myself right now, and I don't think I could be gentle. So if you have any respect for me, you won't torture me. Save your nauseating gratitude. I don't want it."

He shoved her hand back to her chest, and she looked up at him, confused with their interaction. With the way her heart clenched.

The desire to touch him hadn't been out of gratitude. Or had it?

"I had to do it. Zabini threatened to—"

"Stop." Draco sighed. "I'll be able to listen to your reasons later, but right now I'm so furious, I can't think straight."

"Oh— okay."

Hermione stepped back, cheeks burning. He glared at her retreat, as if he hated that she obeyed his request. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then he turned and walked toward the door. But before he exited, he stopped and stared hard at her.

"If you ever have an urge to murder someone, please involve me first. Killing in this world needs to be either subtle or with the confidence of acquittal."

"You could involve your aunt. That would absolve us both from solving the problem."

"That would *not* be subtle. She doesn't know yet, and no one else would dare to tell her. Very few people saw what really happened. It would be easy to find the source." He clenched a fist by his side. "If you want me to eliminate Blaise, I will, but it'll take time and patience, even more so than before."

For a moment, she saw what he wished to hide. Rapid breathing. Furrowed brow. Nostrils flared. It could have been anger, but for the wide eyes.

Fear stared back at Hermione.

Whatever he'd overheard discussed about her had shaken him.

Yet, despite his reservations, he still freed her and offered to help with her original goal, putting himself at risk in both cases.

"Draco—" she started again, but he turned and left the room, his expression shuttered.

Now alone, she did nothing but rub her empty wrists and stare down at the open obsidian shackles.

For years, she thought she wanted nothing more than a choice. But Hermione was starting to understand that she wanted more than scraps thrown in exchange for sustenance. She didn't want protection in exchange for submission. She refused to be the dog to a master, even a benign one.

What Hermione wanted more than anything was freedom.

And only Draco had ever offered to give it to her.

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Mild torture

## Chapter 33: Collision Course

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Billie Eilish– “Hostage”

Art: A beautiful cover art was created by Nurchie. It's featured on chapter one. Ivmaruva also created an amazing portrait of The Butcher. I'll be featuring it at the bottom of chapter 10. Both the pieces will be linked at the bottom of this chapter as well.

Thank you MyPrivateInsanity for being my ride or die.

The next update might be delayed by a day or two. So sometime from the 16th-18th. I'll try to get it out on Sunday, but there are no promises.

### Collision Course

A day after returning from the ministry, Hermione heard the pop of the floo after breakfast. Investigating the rare noise, she found a tall woman in the front sitting room, wearing cream silk blouse and linen trousers. Her black hair was cut in a jaw-length bob, with a pearl headband that softened her masculine features.

It made such an odd and elegant combination, Hermione barreled to a stop in shock. The woman stood still, scanning her from head to toe.

"Pale yellow looks dreadful on you." She wrinkled her nose. "With your skin undertones, it makes you resemble a walking corpse. I'd suggest that you never wear it again."

Hermione just blinked.

"And who are you?"

The woman glanced at her perfectly manicured pale pink nails and then squinted her eyes, studying her harder.

"Next time, try jewel tones," the woman answered in an acerbic tone. "In fact—"

"Pansy dear," someone said behind her. "What did I say about playing nice?"

Hermione twisted at the familiar voice, finding an old friend leaning against the opposite wall, arms crossed on his chest. He flashed a blinding smile.

"Dean!" Hermione ran and threw herself into his arms. He tightened his grip as she reached up and kissed his cheek in joy.



"I was waiting for you to notice me." He pulled back and motioned to the woman. "This is Pansy Parkinson."

Hermione turned to view the woman again, not knowing how to feel about the introduction.

Pansy didn't have any choice in the arrangement either, but until Hermione could corner Dean somewhere private and question him about his treatment, she didn't feel any goodwill toward the woman.

The feeling, it seemed, was mutual. Pansy eyed her like she was a stain on her pristine linen trousers.

They held each other's stare, neither backing down, until Pansy rolled her eyes.

"All right," she said. "I'll *attempt* to play nice. This is going against my nature, so I hope you appreciate the effort."

Dean snorted behind her.

"You don't have to worry, Pans. I love both of you equally. Honestly, if you tried, I think you could become friends."

Pansy visibly grimaced. "Perhaps on a day when my senses aren't assaulted by that atrocious yellow. It offends my eyes. Now, run along and talk." She shooed her hands, still not looking happy. "I know you've been dying to see her."

"And what will you do?" Dean asked.

"Oh, I spent many days in this manor growing up. I'll find something to fill the time. Is Draco around?"

Hermione shook her head, strangely intimidated by the woman. "He's out at the moment."

Hermione had barely seen him since their confrontation. Not that she'd tell *her* that.

Pansy sighed and looked her up and down for the last time.

"Then I shall make a list of the correct colours for your wardrobe. It's obvious you're colour blind and desperately require my assistance. Perhaps then you can cease looking like a living infection."

Without a further word, Pansy stuck her nose in the air and glided out the door.

Once she was out of earshot, Hermione turned to Dean.

"She's— um— well, she's—"

"Something."

"Yes, she's definitely something."

Dean grinned.

"Now, show me around your new home." He let his eyes trail around the room, at all the delicate touches she'd grown immune to. "It feels impossible, but this might be grander than Nott manor."

---

After wandering the grounds, they sat in the shade of one of the hedges. For the first time in weeks, sunshine broke through the grey clouds, but the chill of winter remained. Hermione pulled her cloak closer as she leaned her head on Dean's shoulder.

Dean held a bag of grain given to them by request from Mipsy, and he intermittently threw a handful for the birds to peck at. Crookshanks had followed them out and kept hissing at the peacocks if they wandered too close.

"Why albino peacocks?" Dean asked.

"They needed something as pretentious as Lucius' hair." Hermione grinned. "Finch would love—"

She cut herself off, almost cursing herself for bringing him up again.

Dean reached out and squeezed her hand. He hadn't seen Finch since they'd left, and only got updates from Pansy. From what he knew, Daphne's father remained a staunch pureblood bigot, bitter his line needed to be tainted, and let Finch know it. The abuse seemed emotional in nature instead of physical like his last household.

"A part of me hopes they sell him, though I'd worry he'd go to someone worse." Dean threw some seeds, and the peacock flared out its feathers. Crookshanks seemed to be contemplating murder. "That is if he ever manages to get Daphne pregnant."

After muggleborn boys performed their duty, the purebloods sometimes bought them to manage the estate grounds. Both Dean and Finch had been trained in the logistics of it, just in case.

"Do you really think they'll sell him?"

"No, I think they'll want more than one child. If the Greengrass patriarch has anything to say about it, the poor girl will be pregnant for years to come. But from Pansy's talks with Daphne, I'm not even sure if they've managed to consummate."

A knot twisted her stomach, thinking about it.

"Have you been able— actually, never mind, forget I asked."

Dean smiled and shook his head.

"One time— the most awkward night of my life. After that, we tried other means."

"What other means are there?"

Dean threw a grain toward a peacock that managed to wander close— Al, she believed. It pecked the ground, despite Crookshanks warnings. Her cat lazed near her feet, flicking his tail in agitation, as if he owned the garden.

"We've tried to— ah, well, *transfer* it." Dean seemed embarrassed. "When that didn't work, Pansy's father found a muggle doctor that used to specialise in infertility. Absolutely no one knows about that part, so it needs to be kept secret."

"Of course." Hermione nodded. "I'm surprised Pansy's father allowed it."

"Parkinson's not so bad," Dean's voice went softer. "Pansy told her father about Finch and me. He knows there are complications, but he says he'd rather not go through the trouble of finding another breeder. Really, I think he enjoys our Sunday fly arounds. Pansy hates the outdoors, so he seems grateful for someone that likes to spend time with him."

By his tone, the affection was mutual. In his old home, Avery never beat him, but no matter what Dean did to impress his old master, the man had remained cold.

Dean let out a breath and closed his eyes.

"We've tried everything. If I don't get her pregnant, they'll start to investigate. And if they find something abnormal—well, I don't want to leave. Pansy is my friend now. And her father— I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm happy." Dean's anxiety rolled off him, but she had no way to soothe his new fear.

Instead, she dug inside a new purse she'd created and extracted a small scroll. With her new access to a full library, it didn't take long to figure out the correct charms this time around.

"What's this?"

"A new invention," she said. "It's similar to the coins, but with this, we can talk as much as we want. After you write a message, the ink will disappear, so there are no worries of leaving it lying around. If you want to see if I left you a message, just tap it once. If you want to see a previous message, you can tap it twice. It will give the name of the sender at the bottom, so if I connect more people, we can all see who the message is from."

"But couldn't anybody see it then?"

She knew he worried about Finch.

"I thought of that too. When you get back to your home, press your thumb to the page. After that, it only responds to you. If anyone else tried to touch it, they'd see an empty scroll. I hope to get one to the others when I can."

She almost faltered on the last line, because getting a scroll into Julie's hands might be dangerous and getting one to Finch just as hard. The thought made her ill. She hadn't told Dean anything about Julie, not wishing to add to his burdens yet, but she believed he suspected something terrible by her silence.

Dean held the parchment like a precious jewel, and his eyes welled up with tears. Leaning over, he placed a quick kiss on her cheek.

"Brilliant! I've missed you so much."

"Perhaps Mr. Greengrass can be convinced to let Finch come over next time."

"Perhaps," he whispered, as if renewed with hope.

It sounded like a dream that might never come true.

---

A head rolling toward her, making a terrible sound. A spray of blood, splattering across her face. A deafening scream, so loud it hurt her ears. Hermione attempted to get away from the blood, but she had nowhere to go. It rose as a river, until it pulled her under, drowning her. She tried to swim to the top, but the viscous liquid held her in stasis.

A shove to her shoulder, and she gasped awake.

"Granger," a comforting voice said. "It's just a dream."

It took a moment to come to awareness. The sheets curled around her legs, contorted into an odd position. Her whole body shivered, remembering the river of blood, thick and warm, trickling down her throat, into her eyes— so real she wished to shed her skin to rid herself of the feeling.

Her dreams had always plagued her as a child, but this might have been among the worst.

Draco stood next to her, hand still on her shoulder. Chest bare and glowing from the moonlight filtering through the windows, hair mussed. It made her wish to reach up, thread her fingers through the fine stands, and brush them back into place. Pyjama bottoms slung low on his hips, highlighting his sculpted abdomen. Though thinner than Titus, his torso seemed impossibly longer.

Hermione glanced up to his face, devoid of emotion, realising she'd been staring maybe a little too much.

"Do you need dreamless sleep?" He asked.

"No, it doesn't work on me very well." As a child, she overused the potion to the point she became immune to it, no matter the strength of the brew.

"Right, well, here's your cat." Draco bent down below the edge of the bed and emerged with a bundle of orange fur, giving a familiar disgruntled hiss. "Quiet, you beast. I'm just returning you to your mistress." He set the angry feline on the bed with a plop. "Crooks was the one who woke me. Not gently, I must say." He touched his cheek, showing off thin scratches.

She never did ask where Draco spent his nights, but with the multitude of rooms in the manor, she assumed he had plenty of options.

"Thank you."

Draco rubbed the back of his neck.

"Well, if that's all you need—"

"Stay." She didn't know why she asked, but in the moment, the thought of him exiting the room and leaving her alone with her mind was worse than the nightmare. Theo's presence used to soothe the lingering terror, maybe Draco's would too. "Please, it's hard to go back to sleep after."

He froze a moment, and then his whole body loosened.

"Scoot over then."

She did as he asked, shuffling away, and he lifted the sheets and slid in beside her.

They stayed that way for a moment, rigid and staring at the ceiling, but she needed another human. Her heart still pounded hard in chest, and she felt nauseous. From experience, cuddling close to another warm body helped end the terror.

Hermione rolled close. Draco stiffened again under her as she placed her head on his shoulder and her hand on his chest. He hesitated but wrapped his arm along her back.

"It was only a dream," he said.

"It wasn't just a dream." Her memories conjured the horror, constantly reminding her of things she wished to forget.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

She listened to the thump of his heart.

"Do you want *me* to talk?"

"Yes."

"Pleasant or serious?"

"Serious." Hermione didn't know if she wanted something happy yet. "About you. Something you've never told anyone else."

"What do you want to know?"

There was a question that plagued her, but she didn't want to pry.

"You don't have to answer, but you said you killed someone when you were thirteen. Who was it?"

With the stillness of his chest, she thought she might have gone too far, but then his arm tightened along her back.

"An Order member responsible for my mum's death— one of the last caught that helped plan the attack." This time she stiffened under his touch. "My father told me to do it. Said I needed the experience to heal. But I wanted to do it regardless. I'd looked forward to the moment for years. Planned out the moment in my head in graphic detail before sleep. I wanted to see him beg and cry, feel as much fear as my mum. But— the man didn't beg. He only looked at me in a strange way."

Hermione didn't ask why Lucius encouraged Draco, still a child, to execute the man. Most predators must teach their young to kill— training for a life where they need to learn the killing bite to survive. Hermione assumed it was the same motive behind Lucius' insistence for Draco to master the skill, preparing his son to thrive in a violent world.

"Did you use the killing curse?"

"No," he whispered into the night, the skin of his chest hot under her cheek. "My father didn't want my soul damaged that first time. Dark magic comes with a cost. Since then, I've used it twice, but I don't plan on making it a habit. There are ways to kill without it."

She knew that too. Titus rarely used an Avada. He once told her he reserved it for his moments of mercy, or if he needed to be quick.

Hermione let her hand rest on his abdomen, feeling the rise and fall of his chest. On impulse, she traced the grooves between the muscles, enjoying the sensation of touching, liking the way he tensed under her fingers.

"You sound like you regret it."

"He killed my mum. I shouldn't regret it."

"But you do?"

"No, Granger, I don't." He studied the ceiling. "But I never did forget the way he looked at me. As if I was the one on death row instead of him."

They fell into a long silence, contemplating what he'd just said. It comforted her, knowing Draco might understand her nightmares. They'd both killed people at a young age. They'd both grown up motherless. Theo helped her, but Draco might have been right in the glade; maybe seeing the death of a parent bonded them in an irreparable way. Blood for blood, a continuous orbit around the same sun. They had always meant to collide.

"Will you use the curse on Blaise?"

"Absolutely not. He won't receive anything fast or merciful."

Hermione tapped her fingers on his chest with anxious energy, knowing she couldn't ignore the conversation forever.

"I've been wanting to say—"

"There's no need," he stopped her. "I know why you did it. Whether you want to apologise or explain, it doesn't change the fact of what happened. She's your friend— and I can't expect for you *not* to react. That's part of your nature." He gave a hard sigh. "You've been banned from the parties, by the way. At least, for a while."

She didn't know if that relieved her or disappointed her, because it meant she wouldn't have any access to Julie now.

"How will you kill him?" She needed to know.

His hand played with the ends of her curls, twirling the strands on his finger.

"No more secrets until you're better at occlumency." He gave a soft tug to her hair. "The biggest hurdle is motive. All the fingers would point to us right now. Until that changes, we have to wait. I'm attempting to create a motive for someone else, but it might take time."

The idea of waiting made her stomach tumble, and now she regretted the turn in conversation, worried over Julie.

Worried that she'd made everything worse in her quest to help. The guilt threatened to paralyse her.

"Tell me something pleasant," she asked.

She could swear he smirked against her hair.

"I used to sleep with your letters under my pillow."

Her breath caught, but he didn't explain any further.

"Go to sleep, Granger."

It took longer than she wanted to go to sleep after that revelation, but eventually she drifted off with her head on his chest and his arm curled along her back.

Much later in the night, Crookshanks settled on Draco's chest next to her hand— a temporary ceasefire.

---

The next morning, he walked into her room just as she woke, already dressed.

"How can you sleep so late?" He asked in slight disgust.

Hermione groaned and shoved her head into a pillow. "Ugh, you're a morning person." She made sure to emphasise the title like it was a disease.

"As enticing as you look in my bed, you need to wake up." He glanced at his watch. "It's time to go."

"Go where?"

"You'll only find out when you're ready. I'll let your curiosity motivate you."

After he exited the room, Hermione rubbed her eyes and wished to curl back into her sheets, but this was the first time she'd gotten to spend with him in days, and she wasn't about to waste the opportunity.

A few hours later, she met him in the front sitting room. He sat on a silk yellow couch, reading a book and rolled his eyes when he noticed her.

"Remind me to give you a two hour head start each time."

"Have you seen my hair? These curls don't look this magnificent by accident." She wore a long, flowy dress. It fit her like a glove up top and flared out around her hips, and she resisted the desire to twirl in it like a little kid. "So where are we going?"

"To your new job." Draco put his book down and stood abruptly, walking past her toward the floo. She stared after him, probably looking stupid, mouth opening and closing like a fish. But she couldn't have heard him correctly.

"I'm sorry— what?"

"Your new job," he said again, much slower.

"But it's Christmas Eve."

"Of course. This is an early present. Now hurry up, the shops will only be open until the afternoon."

"This isn't funny." The hope physically hurt. She'd dreamed of this for so long.

"I don't back down from my promises." A small grin broke through his occlumency. It was enough of a slip that it made it seem real.

She wished he'd stop occluding around her. Still, she wasn't about to question good fortune.

"Oh Merlin." Hermione placed a hand toward her curls. "Maybe I should have worn something else. Is this okay? And my hair— do I need it up or down—"

Draco placed a hand on her wrist.

"I know this might be an impossible request, but do try and not overthink this."

"Wait," Hermione demanded, still confused. "Don't I need shackles?"

She walked around the manor without them, able to do magic as she pleased, but she didn't think Draco could keep her free outside of the grounds. Not after Dolohov ordered for them to stay on.



Draco reached up on the mantle, where the obsidian shackles already waited, and she realised he had planned to put them on all along.

"It's just for today. On other days, we'll get around the rules."

Hermione held her wrists out, and he clipped them on each wrist. The buzz under her skin vanished. But it didn't upset her, knowing they'd be off again soon.

"How would you do that?"

Draco focused on the shackles, brow furrowing.

"The good thing about being a potion master is that I have an infinite supply of any type I'd like, including those that can camouflage identity."

"Polyjuice?" She surmised.

He nodded and reached into his pocket, taking out a rolled up white handkerchief. Inside was a thick bundle of dark hair, tied carefully in red string. He contemplated a moment and took out one dark strand to show her. "I think this woman was a similar size to you, so you wouldn't need a new wardrobe."

"Who is this?"

Draco shrugged.

"My father always has some secret identities on hand, just in case. Your fake name will be Sofia Romano. We have all the required papers. Though, if I were you, I wouldn't dig too deep into the question. You might not like the answer."

Hermione didn't know if she liked wearing the anonymous skin, obtained unethically, but it might be the only way to get out of the house without her magic smothered. "So—hypothetically—I could walk around Diagon Alley all by myself."

"Hypothetically, yes. If you always keep polyjuice with you. Not today though. There's no need for the potion until next Monday."

The energy of the thought zipped through her body, and for the first time in ages, pure joy burst through her, as if experiencing Diagon Alley for the first time.

"Let's go right now!"

"I was the one that was waiting on you."

She nearly danced to the floo, and he gave a small pat on her arse as they barreled through to the Leaky.

---

**Malfoy's Apothecary and Medicinals**, the sign read.

"It's yours?" she asked.

"Yes, and I needed help at the till, so I happened to hire a foreign girl. She's much too bouncy, but she'll have to do."

Hermione ignored his teasing and entered the store with reverence. She walked over to the register, touching the till and the tall wooden counter, where she would soon stand behind. And then she inspected the potion ingredients. The more expensive rare ones had buzzing wards protecting them. When she arrived at the silver toad slime displayed behind the counter, she sensed him at her back.

"What do you think?"

"It's wonderful." She glanced around as a thought came to her. "Did you buy this store for me?"

His job required him to travel to procure potions. Though he mostly stayed in the country, sometimes the ministry approved for him to visit France. He worked with various apothecaries and spent most of his time in potion creation and production.

But he didn't need an actual store front. Not for the money it would bring in, and not for its use. Even with his level of wealth, buying property on Diagon Alley must have been expensive.

He seemed to hesitate. "If it's not to your liking, I could try and get you a job in the ministry or at Gringotts, or something else entirely— though those options might be dangerous."

A warmth knocked against her chest. It invaded without her consent and laid siege to something hidden inside her. As he waited for her answer, her natural resistance cracked, letting the sensation seep past her defences.

Hermione didn't bother denying her impulse.

She lunged forward and kissed him.

A brief brush of softness. A sharp intake of breath.

Draco grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back. He examined her face, and she wondered what he found, what he searched for.

"Granger— I told you I don't want your grat—"

She closed her eyes and pressed forward again. His hands on her shoulders didn't provide much resistance, as her lips connected to his again,

He remained like stone, unyielding to her gentle caress, fingers digging into her skin.

Was he going to reject her again? She tried to hide her mortification by pulling back slightly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have—"

"Fuck it."

He tugged her into a bruising kiss. Stone turned to fire as he groaned against her mouth. She opened for him, trembling at his taste— icy mint and warmth. The juxtaposition made her ravenous.

It was a frantic consumption. Lips roamed— first to her cheek, then her neck, then her throat. Hands brushed along her body, tracing her curves and hips.

He attempted to pull her legs up, but instead, they both sank to the floor on their knees.

Wishing to feel his skin, she tugged on the lapels of his shirt and untucked the bottom.

"Granger," he groaned against her neck, as her hand slipped down, gently touching the hard bulge in his trousers.

Perhaps they were going too fast. Was he warning or encouraging? She didn't care. For the first time since the Trial, true desire bloomed inside her, spreading along her nerves. It ached as intensely as when she'd consumed the potion. She needed to touch him, needed him to explore her.

"This doesn't mean anything," she said, wishing to set some boundaries. "It's just fun."

"Stop lying." He lightly bit the curve of her neck, and her mind short-circuited. She struggled to get out her thoughts.

"I— I'm not ready for sex."

"I'll take whatever you give me."

His mouth dipped further down, closing gently on her breast over her dress, and she let her head tilt back in pure ecstasy.

It was all the permission she needed— a promise to stop when she wished.

"I can't do it," he said, sounding desperate, detangling them, though she tried to pull him back. "Not like this."

Before the act could hurt her feelings, he dug in his pocket, fingers fumbling, and extracted the metal circle— the key. The metal clicked against one shackle and then the other. They both snapped open, and he threw them aside without care.

"Now," he said, cupping her cheek, giving her a soft kiss. "Where were we?"

Hermione gathered her courage and rested the tips of her fingers on his belt buckle.

He froze, and then grinned against her lips, eyes intent on her. "Tell me what you want to do."

She wasn't quite sure herself.

"I want to unbuckle your belt." Her fingers pulled and tugged until it broke free from its restraint. "And then I want to undo your trousers."

The button released easier than she expected. Her heart beat so hard she felt it throb along her body, travelling lower between her thighs. She needed him to touch her too, but his hands now rested on her hips, just waiting for her to make the first move.

"And then?" he asked, voice gruff and low.

"And then I want to do this."

His dress shirt felt smooth under her fingers as she placed her hand low on his stomach. Slowly, she brushed down and slipped her hand inside his trunks. His cock throbbed warm and hard in her hand, and she manoeuvred it until she could pull it over his trunks. He helped by sliding his trousers down just enough. When she wrapped her hand around the rigid length, she kept her eyes locked on his, wishing to watch his expressions.

"Granger," he whispered again as she started giving soft tugs. With a press to her shoulders, he guided her to the floor right behind the counter, shifting her legs up and open so he settled between them. His fingers trailed along the edges of her thighs, scrunching up the material of her dress.

The ding of a bell interrupted them.

Someone entered, shoes hitting the hardwood floor.

"Hello," a man's voice asked. "Anyone here?"

"Stay down," Draco hissed at her, before straightening his clothes, tugging his trousers back into place haphazardly. His shirt remained rumpled, along with his hair. "I'm here," he called out. "I was just— rearranging some things. Perhaps you didn't notice, but the Apothecary isn't open yet."

Hermione smoothed her clothes and scooted under the till as quietly as possible. Her shackles rested just out of reach, which meant she couldn't risk being seen.

"I desperately need a few items," the man said. "My wife is ill."

Hermione glanced up, seeing Draco's face twist in displeasure. He seemed like he might deny the request.

"Make it quick."

As Draco once again became a statue, she noticed that in his hurry to dress, he didn't tuck himself in completely. Fortunately, the counter height covered it from prying eyes, but not from her view.

As she listened to the shoes wandering the store, she continued staring at him. Something had been morphing inside her all morning. A low flutter in her belly. Every time she thought

about all the work and thought it took just to let her out of the house, without obsidian shackles, free to come and go as she pleased, it increased.

A job, like he promised. Even a ministry job, if she wished. The ability to go anywhere she wanted at any time. She'd never in her life anticipated such freedom.

Titus claimed he loved her, but he'd never done anything like this.

She wasn't ready for sex or love or anything serious, but she wished to release the pent up tension in their bodies. Wished to continue what she'd started.

Hermione let her courage peek through, forming a plan in her mind. For the first time in months, her curiosity and thirst for life outweighed her trauma.

The customer still walked around the store, and Draco stood in front of the till as if he were the only person in the room.

Hermione placed her hand on Draco's thigh, and he jolted slightly, but gave no other indication he felt her as her hands wandered up his trousers.

His empty expression only caused her body to ache with want.

"What are you doing?" He whispered, eyes forward, as her fingers loosened what he'd flung together. Though the customer couldn't see her, the threat of discovery only spurred her on more.

Just as she once again freed his cock, his hand went out and touched the top of her head, possibly to warn her.

"Do you want me to stop?" Hermione whispered back.

"Did you say something?" The customer asked.

A moment of silence, as he contemplated both questions.

"No." Malfoy's head bent up for a second, as if asking the universe for help. "Carry on."

Draco unthreaded his fingers from her hair and braced them on the wooden counter in front of him. She wrapped her hands along the length of him, about to continue what she began on the store floor.

And that was when she had another idea. Being under the till brought back the memory of her being huddled under a desk, horrified and aroused.

The only time she'd witnessed the act was when the whore did it. Since that time, in the quiet of the night, she'd imagined trying it. Wondered what he would taste like. Wondered how it would feel to have him release on her tongue.

Remembering how the woman began, she placed her tongue toward the bottom of his shaft and licked upward.

Caught off guard, Draco made a strangled noise and bent forward, as if unable to stand upright.

She did it a second time, loving the reactions she forced from him.

"Fucking hell," he whispered in a ragged voice. "The customer is still here."

She shrugged and placed the tip of his cock in her mouth, not really knowing what she was doing, running off instinct. A bead of cum was at the top, and she sucked it slowly. The taste was salty, and she didn't like it too much. But the way his eyes rolled up for just a second, made her body shudder.

"Do you need directions?" Draco asked the man.

"I'm just browsing."

"Take your time." His tone suggested the man should absolutely not take his time.

Hermione continued, unsure how to do it right. After giving a firmer suck, she opened wider, allowing more of the firm skin to slide past her lips.

Draco slammed a fist against the wooden counter.

"Are you alright?" The customer asked in alarm.

"Splinter."

The customer tutted in sympathy.

Hermione took him in deeper, and he hissed low. Lifting one hand off the counter, he placed it back into her curls and pressed forward.

It went further than she was used to, and she gagged, quickly covering up the sound. As if alarmed he went too far, he pulled back, but she rolled her eyes. If the muggle woman could do it, then so could she. Hermione planned to exceed expectations, despite the learning curve.

Draco tightened one hand into her hair in warning for her to stop as the customer placed his potion ingredients on the counter.

"Do you know when you'll get beetle dung in? I can't seem to find it anywhere, and I must have it."

Draco tensed, attempting to occlude, but he struggled.

Maybe it was cruelty. Maybe it was absolute pleasure. But the thought of breaking his iron composure caused all the hair along her body to stand on end. She wanted nothing more in the world than to see him shatter.

Knowing the customer hovered right above them, and feeling bold, Hermione allowed his cock as far into her mouth as she could.

Draco shuddered, ringing up the purchases with fumbling fingers, trying to answer the man as she licked the tip again with her tongue.

"Did you hear me?" the customer asked again

"W— we should get— the fourth. Come back the fourth!"

"Merlin, are you okay?" The man dropped some galleons on the counter. "You sound ill, and you're flushed. Maybe you should see a healer."

"If you don't get out of this fucking store right this moment, I'm going to curse you with boils."

"Why I never! I should tell your father about this horrid treatment."

"I dare you to."

The man made a noise of complaint, and she assumed his face twisted in horrified outrage, but he gathered his purchases quickly and headed to the door.

When the bell jingled overhead, signalling the man left, Draco locked the door with a spell and glared down at her.

"You evil little witch." He took a moment to admire the sight of her on her knees, with her mouth open, the tip of his cock still resting against her tongue. "Always breaking the rules." He thrust gently into her mouth, digging both hands now into her curls. "Always getting into trouble." She sucked again, and this time he finally broke composure, pressing forward with a loud groan, as if his whole world had fractured apart. He continued the movement in her mouth until he came with his head tipped back. She tried to swallow like the woman had, but a little ran down the side of her mouth when he slid out.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered, giving a cheeky grin, though her jaw ached.

Draco shivered in the aftermath, and he released her hair, leaning against the counter. He placed his head in his hands, catching his breath, as if holding his composure for that long took everything out of him.

And then he laughed. The movement shook his whole body.

"Bloody hell, life with you is never boring."

After wiping her mouth, she gave a small laugh too—at the ridiculousness of the situation, at the thrill of it.

"Did it feel good?"

"*Did it feel good?*" He mocked her tone and reached down, dragging her up by her shoulders. She stood up, finding her knees ached a little from being in the same spot for so long.

On her feet, he lifted her up by her waist, sitting her on the edge of the counter.

And then he fired another spell at the door.

"So they can't see in," he explained. "Though based on what just happened maybe you like being watched."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He tugged on the underside of her knees, laying her back against the wood, leaving her staring at the ceiling. She gave no resistance as his hands wandered up her dress, pushing the voluminous fabric aside, and then he tugged off her knickers, sliding them down her legs.

He stared at her bare skin afterward and licked his lips.

"I'm returning the favour." He leaned down, tongue almost pressed against the soft flesh of her cunt, and stared up at her. "Tell me exactly what you want and please be loud about it."

He hovered mere centimetres above her clit, until she realised he was waiting for permission. She anticipated that her body would seize in discomfort, that her instinct would demand she push him away. But she loosened her legs, pulling them up just a little, showing he could start when he wished.

When his mouth touched the parts of her that ached for him, she almost lifted off the counter, but his hands kept her hips in place.

Just like he promised, he followed her directions, licking her, sucking her.

"Right there," she gasped. Draco wasn't as skilled as Titus, but he learned fast, and after a few corrections and experiments, it wasn't long before she writhed under him, whimpering in low cries of pleasure.

When she finally climaxed, legs pressing together, fingers gripping his hair, he continued to give lazy flicks of his tongue until she pushed on him to stop.

After lifting his head, he gave her a wicked smirk, gazing at her between her trembling thighs — as if everything had worked out exactly like he'd planned.

"Merry Christmas, Granger."

Cover Art by [Nurchie](#)      Titus Nott by [Ivmaruva](#)



## Chapter 34: Remnants of Decay

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Jacob Lee- "Demons" (philosophical sessions) There are two version of this song. I like the acoustic one.

Thank you MyPrivateInsanity for being an awesome person and beta!

Surprise! I managed to get this chapter out today with the help of my beta. Next update will be on Monday 1st/ Tuesday 2nd due to a family event that I have that weekend.

### Remnants of Decay

The jingle of a bell heralded the last customer leaving the store. With a flick of her wand, Hermione posted the "closed" sign.

Her first full day of work— she wanted to simultaneously shout in excitement, sigh in relief, and take a very long nap. Business had been slow, but she revelled in each interaction. A small smile, a nod of a head, a thank you.

The customers didn't stare at her in curiosity like they would have if she'd been herself. As Hermione, she'd stood next to Titus, Draco, or an auror— all deterrents for normal interactions. Transformed into an ordinary witch, she participated in society as if she'd been born into it.

After closing duties, Hermione gathered her identity papers, going over the details again, even though she'd spent days memorising them. She swallowed more polyjuice potion, providing her two hours to wander, though she tucked the flask into her pocket, just in case she needed an extra dose.

Before leaving, Hermione checked a handheld mirror she'd kept under the counter, staring at the alien appearance: short pitch black curls, olive skin, dark eyes. She moved her head side to side; without the weight of her normal curls, it felt odd, like cutting a nail too close

Hermione placed the mirror back in the drawer, finding it disconcerting to see another face— a person with an unknown fate. But she refused to dwell on it for long.

Exiting the shop, she locked the door and began her planned adventure. Grey clouds hung close to the ground, making the streets foggy. Hermione bundled in her cloak and glanced around, nervous the few people out in the nasty weather would see right past her disguise. But of course, they didn't, so she continued.

Hermione visited her old haunts first: books, ice cream, the menagerie. She even entered the quidditch shop just because she could, thinking about Theo.

With each step, her freedom sank into her further.

No one to tell her where to go.

No one to tell her when to go home.

No one trailing right behind.

As she stepped back outside, her eyes went to the Leaky Cauldron.

An idea unfurled in her mind. One she tried to dispel. But she'd daydreamed about it for far too long for her to banish the thought.

Since the Order attack on the ministry, apparition had been banned around most public wizarding spaces. The only way in and out of wizarding London was through floo— or by exiting Diagon Alley into the muggle city beyond.

Just behind the familiar pub awaited a mysterious tangle of streets and buildings. She'd been into the muggle world a few times, but never by herself, and always with a specific destination in mind, usually to drop Theo off at Kings Cross. The path had been set, and they didn't detour.

From what Theo told her, most of the muggles lived outside the big cities and populated the countryside, but a section of muggle London still functioned— a whole new set of shops and places for her to explore.

Her curiosity got the best of her; she desperately wanted to experience the world beyond the boundary containing her.

---

An auror stopped her in the Leaky Cauldron. He wore civilian clothing, so his appearance at the exit surprised her. His silver badge flashed with the firelight.

"What's your purpose in the muggle world and your destination?"

She couldn't back out now. Hermione searched her cloak, while creating a lie.

"I'm going to a nursery to pick up supplies for my employer. He needs a few plants only available there."

She straightened and attempted to act confident, though her hands trembled as she handed over her identity papers. He scanned them with beady eyes, looking for flaws, but she assumed Lucius Malfoy got the best money could buy.

"Who is your employer?"

"Malfoy."

That did the trick. The Malfoy name held a lot of sway. He gave a nod and handed back her paperwork, which she stuffed back inside her cloak pocket.

"Hold out your wrist."

She complied without hesitating, needing to look as if she'd done this before. Though she wished to ask questions, it might cause suspicion.

He placed his wand to the delicate veins. After a nonverbal spell, a blue light burrowed into her skin.

Even without speaking, she understood he'd just placed a temporary trace on her arm, recognizing the pattern. Titus had placed it on her several times before going out in case someone tried to kidnap her again.

"How long will this last?" she dared to ask.

"Three hours at the most. If you wish to travel beyond muggle London, you'll need to reapply the trace at the proper check points. Otherwise, if you attempt to exit the boundaries of the city or if you overstay, the authorities will be alerted."

Hermione did her best to keep her surprise off her face. She'd never had to go through a checkpoint before. Though she'd always been with Titus, so that might be why. He probably had a free pass to go wherever he wanted as a Mediator.

The checkpoint seemed extreme, and she wondered why they ordered it. Because of terrorism, she understood the scrutiny about going *into* Diagon Alley. But why would they care about wizards going out?

Hermione withheld any other questions. She gave a nod to the auror, clutched her wrist to her chest, and stepped into muggle London.

---

Her low heeled boots clicked along the concrete pavement as she walked down Charing Cross Road. The clouds turned darker, but her mood shone bright.

She almost swayed in excitement, but resisted because of the subdued mood around her. Several muggles walked beside and past her, but they kept their heads down, silent. A few cars passed intermittently, and even those proved too quiet.

Hermione became more covert with her curiosity once she started to notice the muggles flinching at her inspection. The people who did pass gave her a wide berth. It took her a bit to realise her clothes identified her as a witch, and a wealthy one at that.

Most of the muggles' clothes looked threadbare, with patches, stains, and tears in the fabric. Despite wearing one of her less expensive items, the fine make of her cloak and dress contrasted against the grungy environment. Something new and clean amongst the muck.

Trying to ignore the wary looks, Hermione pretended to be a muggle from the movies she'd watched with Draco, walking to a pub to meet with her friends to gossip. There would be

drama, of course. Possibly later there'd be a surprise holiday to an island where everything went comically wrong. Maybe even an office romance!

But Hermione found the daydream hard to keep as she walked around, faced with obvious rampant poverty— an atmosphere night and day from pre-curse muggle London. Most of the buildings seemed uninhabited, graffitied and with trash littered near the edges. Broken windows. Overgrown plants. Rats skittering around. Ancient, rusted cars dotted the road, abandoned long ago, pushed aside as much as possible to allow a path through for other cars. She even saw an old double-decker bus, corroded with time, having not run its route in years.

An odd grief took hold of her heart. Instead of the burgeoning life she'd expected, all she found was the remnants of it in decay.

Before long, Hermione copied the people around her. Keeping her head down, only glancing up when needed. Coming to a red telephone booth, she investigated, finding the door hard to open, the phone system destroyed. Still, she touched the old relics, examining them until satisfying her interest.

Walking along, she stumbled upon a food stand. Her stomach rumbled, having not eaten since lunch. The man froze when she walked closer.

"Could I have this?" She pointed at the image of fish and chips displayed on a sign. He only sold a few items.

The man turned pale and jumped to the task.

She watched in fascination as he made her food. Her mouth watered with the smell. Finally, the man handed her meal over, and she took tentative bites of the piping hot chips.

"Do you like it?" he asked in a voice so quiet she almost didn't hear it.

"It's delicious." Not really. The soggy chips dripped in oil, and the fish smelt off, but she plastered on a fake smile.

The man visibly deflated.

Such an odd reaction. Pure fear, as if she'd curse him if she'd thought the opposite.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Oh... n-nothing. You can take what you want."

"That's ridiculous. Of course, I'm going to pay."

She extracted a galleon from her pocket. The food must be worth less, because his eyes went wide staring at the gold, and his hands trembled as he took it from her.

"I don't have the proper change to give back."

"No worries. Just keep it."

His eyes went even wider.

"Thank you." He gave a bow of his head that made her uncomfortable. "I can never repay your kindness."

Kindness? Hermione could admit that she didn't know what things cost. Her entire life she'd never held the purse strings. In both households, anything material that she wanted, she received.

Feeling disconcerted, Hermione continued on her journey. As the streets grew more populated and the functioning stores more abundant, she surmised that she'd reached a busier section of muggle London. Leicester Square— she recognized the vandalised statues from a book she'd read a long time ago.

Slowing down, she allowed herself to examine the new environment closer. She passed a muggle technology shop, where they sold refurbished items. Then a few clothing boutiques, marketing utilitarian clothing of rough homespun fabrics. A vendor sitting on the pavement attempted to give her a bottle of something he claimed cured everything from a headache to warts, but he stopped talking after realising she was a witch.

Ignoring the attention she drew from the small crowd, she inspected the windows of a shop that seemed to sell accessories— scarves, winter coats, and hats. A purple purse caught her eye, perched in the center of a display that she wished to get a closer look at. When Hermione walked into the shop, the workers went silent, eyes widening.

"W—what can I do for you?" They scrambled into position— one behind the counter, the other in front as if to shield her coworker. Hermione wondered why they seemed so terrified.

"I was— well, I was just looking." Hermione swallowed, uncomfortable. "But I really don't need anything. Excuse me."

She turned to leave, wanting to flee.

"Wait," the woman behind the counter yelled. She had pretty blonde hair and freckles across her nose. "Please don't tell your father or husband that we gave you insufficient service. We'll do anything to make you happy."

The hair on the back of her neck rose.

"I'm not— I don't have a father. Really, everything was perfectly nice. I just changed my mind."

The smaller girl burst into tears, and the other dragged her into a tight hug to comfort her.

"Please— my mother depends on me. She's sick, and we can't afford the treatment. If I lose this job, I won't be able to find—"

"Hush, Amy, you're making it worse."

Hermione's stomach lurched in distress. She wouldn't have even come inside if she'd known her presence would upset the girl. Once again, she dug into her pocket and extracted a handful of galleons and placed them on the counter without counting.

"Here, take this."

"What do you mean?" Both the women stared at the coins as if they were a trap.

"For your mother. You said she needed—"

Hermione stopped talking. Now they stared at her as if she'd just sprouted a new head.

"I can't take those," Amy said, eyes still filled with tears. "That— that's an entire *year's* worth of salary."

"A year?" It was just a handful of galleons. It was such a paltry amount, she considered it pocket change.

"Nonsense. I gave it to you. Take it."

"I don't feel good about doing that without you buying something."

Hermione inspected the purple bag from where she stood. Now that she'd entered the stop, she recognized that the item was of much lower quality than she'd first thought. She would probably never use it, but she couldn't leave without completing a purchase.

"I'll buy that one."

They bundled up her purchase, whispering thank yous for her charity. The blonde woman grabbed her hand with teary eyes and started to kneel.

"It's okay." She tugged out of her hold. "Please, there's no need for that."

Hermione nearly ran out of the store to get away, welcoming the chilled air against her skin to regain her balance. The interactions disturbed her, a contrast to her experience at the apothecary.

Hermione overestimated her ability to navigate the muggle world by herself. Next time, she'd be sure to bring along Draco.

Hermione pulled up her hood and placed a water-repellent charm on her cloak. She shuffled along, as silent and subdued as the muggles. The streets began to clear out with the weather. It looked like it was going to get dodgy, so that meant it was time for her adventure to end.

The same guard hovered inside the Leaky.

"Did you manage to find what you need?" he asked while taking off the trace.

"No, I didn't."

The man gave a laugh. "Doesn't surprise me. There's nothing worthwhile in the muggle cities. Just rats and people who resemble them."

Hermione took back her wrist and tried to smile at the man, but she failed. She walked quickly to the floos, hurtling through to the manor.

In the sitting room, she collapsed on a yellow couch, breathing heavily. Digging into her cloak, she took out a few extra galleons, flipping them over in her palm. They clinked together and then slipped from her fingers, crashing to the floor. They could go missing, and she'd never search for them. What would be the point when she could get more?

They meant nothing to her.

Hermione wished to crawl out of her skin. Titus' voice echoed in her mind.

*Merlin, you're so fucking spoiled. Do you know how many people would trade places with you? You've never been without food. You always have the best clothes, while the rest of the country is struggling to survive. You have no clue what suffering really is.*

To her greatest shame, Hermione realised that maybe he had a point.

Hermione picked up the galleons with care and placed them in her pocket, deciding to tell Draco what she experienced after she sorted through her thoughts.

---

A few days later, Theo dropped off presents from the Nott household.

Theo gave her a device that could be placed in her mouth, enabling her to breathe underwater. "It's so you can check to see if Malfoy's ponds have water beasts. Maybe I could join you on your exploration."

She'd laughed at the childhood memory and kissed his cheek with thanks, but waited until he left to open any others.

Later that night, she faced the remaining presents. Tabitha bought her a pretty red hat charmed to not fall off, along with a note saying how much she loved and missed her. Hermione held the parchment to her chest, knowing her nanny couldn't visit because her sister fell ill again.

After setting down Tabitha's present, she opened the others. Bitty made a flower crown from the Garden— something she often did in summers past— charmed to resist decay. Hermione sniffed the violets before placing it on her head. Eddy packaged her a whole apple crumble still piping hot.

Conjuring a spoon, she took a giant bite and then glared at the last present, smaller than the rest.

Hermione licked the spoon a few times before her curiosity got the better of her. She opened the pretty fabric, taking off the bow.

Inside rested a bracelet— a replica of what she'd given him, except made with a pale leather. Three strands, braided together. Titus had made it himself, per tradition. She could tell by the imperfections along the clasp. He gave no note to explain, but she didn't need it to understand the meaning.

They belonged together, it seemed to say. Forever intertwined.

Hermione set it back inside its box without wearing it.

---

By the end of the month, Hermione had orgasmed on almost every available surface of the manor— the dining table, the bed, in the gardens, in the potions room. Not to mention a memorable time in the library, where Draco tugged her on his face on a settee while she read out loud.

At night, Draco slipped his fingers under the band of her knickers, resting them possessively close. Sometimes he kept his hand there all night without moving, and sometimes she couldn't stand the torture and would tilt her hips up until he began to stroke her. And then in the morning, if she allowed it, he'd lick her slowly, as if he planned to savour her for as long as possible.

She understood his intention wasn't to tease. His intention was to seduce, entice her to open her legs further, to lean into his touch.

A part of her hated that she could enjoy the intimacy while her friends suffered. Hated that she wanted to trust the man who owned her, especially after hearing the warnings from the other muggleborns.

Each time she considered what it might be like to cross the boundary into sex, something held her back. Allowing him access to her body made her vulnerable. Having sex would be exposing her throat to a predator, hoping the beast wasn't hungry.

After she gave him what he wanted, would he transform into his father, cold and cruel? Would he take back every concession he'd made?

Instead of risking it, she took what she wanted, and he consumed what she gave, and she didn't see any reason to change that.

---

Hermione waited patiently until she heard the popping of the floo and then pressed her fingers together.

Snap.

The familiar discomfiting tug and pull of apparition engulfed her body.

She landed in front of Draco right as he entered through the floo, brushing off his trousers. The soot proved stickier than normal, and he looked annoyed that it required cleaning with magic.



"Need help washing off?" She asked.

"Don't you dare—"

She poured a glass of water over him. He sputtered and tried to grab her, but not fast enough.

Snap.

She landed on the opposite side of the room, having gotten great at navigating the manor via apparition.

Draco glowered at her.

"You're always too slow."

"I regret teaching you that." He reached up and loosened his tie, only giving a brief glance down at his soaked white dress shirt. "Will you ever behave, or will you continue to play your games forever?"

"Stop my games? How else could I annoy you enough to chase me down?"

"Chase you? Is that what you're wanting today? Or would you like me to tell you how good you've been?"

Hermione's heart beat quickened. Draco pretended to hate her games, but he loved them too.

Hermione reached over and placed the empty glass—probably priceless and goblin made—on an ornate gold side table.

"Possibly both, but you'll have to catch me first."

He shrugged out of his outer robe, giving her a once over.

"Five second head start and not a moment more."

"What are the rules this time?"

He undid his watch and threw it on the couch for Mipsy to get later.

"No apparition. No magic at all."

"Like that muggle detective movie we watched?"

"Exactly." He held up a finger. "One."

"Wait, what about—"

"Two, Granger. I'm serious. The stress of today has left me feeling— aggressive."

She heeded the warning and sprinted out of the room, listening to the countdown behind her.

---

After several successful diversions, he caught her halfway up the stairs. She squealed as he wrapped his arms around her waist and cast a cushioning spell to break the fall against the hard edges.

"I thought you said no magic."

Pink bloomed on his cheeks as he grabbed her ankle and tugged her closer, forcing her arse to go down a step. He loomed over her, breathing hard. With another flick of his wand, he twisted the portraits around of his ancestors to give them privacy.

"I couldn't risk breaking your pretty little head." He reached for her shoes. He always undressed her with precision, a ritual, peeling back the layers to the soft skin below. It was much too slow for her tastes. She wanted to rip the fabric and claw at things, until they were half-bare against each other.

She attempted to rip at his shirt buttons, but he swatted her hand away.

"I don't think you'll ever learn patience."

"What's the point of patience when I could have what I want right now?"

This was his game— who could break who first. Some days he succeeded in halfway stripping her and then himself, tasting her flesh as he went, letting his tongue rest in teasing places. Some days, she broke his control, and he'd become just as frantic as she was or more.

This time it went back and forth, until she curled up her legs, exposing that she wore no knickers under her clothes, ready for him.

"Merlin, Granger," he groaned. "I'm not a muggle saint."

He played with her clit a moment while working on his belt. Greedy for contact, she grinded against his palm.

She licked the tense veins of his neck, leading up to his ear. "I've been wet for you all day."

"You're being unfair."

He struggled with getting the top of her dress unbuttoned, hands fumbling, and she felt the shiver under his fingertips, dragging the fabric roughly across her body. When he exposed her breasts, he caught one nipple between his teeth, dragging his tongue across it, still pressing and stroking her cunt.

"Did you touch yourself today?" he asked, glancing up with mercury eyes.

"Yes."

He paused.

"Did you think of me?"

"I imagined your cock in my mouth."

"Fuck, you win."

He made a desperate noise, as he pulled down his trousers just enough to grab his cock and slide the rigid length against her clit. They both groaned at the contact, his mouth still over her breast. Her lips pressed on his shoulder.

He rocked against her, pressing a little on his cock to give more friction. They'd improved since their first time, having spent their free time practising.

The stairs dug into her back, even with the cushioning charm, but she barely felt it in her haze, lifting her lower half up to meet each thrust.

One of his hands traced down the skin of her hip sliding inward to the delicate places between her thighs, almost pressing inside her on instinct. She froze a moment, and he pulled back and stared at her.

"I should have asked—"

"No, I— I'd like to try it."

He slipped a single finger inside a place she'd hadn't been touched for awhile—not since the ritual— and her body tensed.

"Is that too much?"

The sensation faded.

"No, it's okay." More than okay. It felt amazing. He waited a second before pressing it a little farther. Adding another finger, he thrust up, and her whole body lit on fire, remembering now how good it felt to have a part of him inside her.

She leaned her head back in bliss, as he once again sucked on her breast and thrust against her clit. Remembering Titus' lesson, she dug her nails in his shoulder.

"Curl your fingers. Stroke the top. There's a spot you can touch."

He bit his lip in concentration, experimenting until he brushed his fingers exactly right. She moaned, lifting his hips.

"Keep going," she begged. "Don't go faster or slower."

The dual sensations were too much. It only took a few more minutes before she arched into her orgasm.

"Fuck, finally." His fingers slipped out of her, and he tried to grab his cock to finish, but this time she swatted his hand away. She helped finish him off, until he groaned and came on her lower stomach.

They remained in their bliss for as long as possible, before he lifted himself to clean. With a simple spell, all traces of his release vanished.

In between teasing kisses, he helped her up.

Once both of them redressed, Draco stiffened.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"We have a guest."

"Who is it?"

He rolled his eyes.

"Your nosey, annoying brother."

"Theo!" Hermione shoved past Draco, pushing him to the side as she hurtled down the stairs, hoping she wore no evidence that Draco Malfoy just defiled her.

---

Something was dreadfully wrong. She sensed it immediately.

Theo had his back to them, facing the fireplace. But his shoulders hunched forward, curling inward.

Dread twisted inside her chest.

"Theo?"

He gave a sob, and her heart lurched into her throat. Finally, he turned, showing a face full of tears, red eyes, puffy skin.

"She's gone," he said, as if she should understand. "Caught an illness from her sister, went to sleep, and didn't wake up. She'd planned to come home—" another sob interrupted his speech.

Her body comprehended it first, going still. But her brain couldn't sort out what he tried to tell her. Or maybe she did know, but she was doing everything possible to find some other explanation.

"What are you talking about? Who's gone?"

Theo walked forward and grabbed her shoulders. In her peripheral vision, she recognized Draco's form waiting in the corner, wearing a grim expression.

"Tabitha's gone, Hermione."

"Gone where? Did she travel—"

"She's dead."

"No." Hermione trembled and shook her head, unable to process what he just said. "No—that can't be possible. She was old, sure, but witches live for much longer and—"

Theo pulled her into a hard hug, and she just stood there frozen. Her logic refused to work through the impossible idea that Tabitha was *dead*.

Hermione had never gotten to see her since the Trials, too focused on getting used to her new life.

Hermione put a hand over her lips, descending into the familiar darkness, the one that had stalked her since childhood.

Hermione stood in the same spot for a long time, soul numb. A few tears escaped, something that hadn't happened in years. It felt like acid dripping down her cheek, scorching her skin. Theo held her as he sobbed, and she let him. For hours they did this, until Theo knew it was time for him to go.

"The funeral will be on Friday. I'll come pick you up in the morning."

"I can bring her," Draco said. She'd almost forgotten he remained in the corner, waiting and watching.

Theo glanced up, just for a moment, apprehensive.

"You aren't invited, Malfoy." He bit his puffy lip. "I tried to talk to Titus—it didn't work. He doesn't want problems." Theo hesitated. "I know how hard it will be to let her go without you, but I promise to be right by her side the whole time. Tabitha was like her mother. She—"

"I know who Tabitha was to her," Draco bit back. He stared at Hermione and slipped his hands in his pockets. After a moment, he closed his eyes and sighed. "Of course, you can go to her funeral. Just— no, I trust you."

No matter how much Draco wanted to let her do as she wished, she knew a large part of him wanted to keep her in a little box, safe and secure—especially away from Titus.

Draco shook his head.

"I'm going to— well, if you need me, I'll be in the potions room." He paused. "I'm sorry, Granger. I know she meant a lot to you."

She gave a nod to him. Even though they'd been physically intimate many times, anything more remained unexplored. Pleasure didn't mean anything. He still kept his secrets close, just like she did. One day, they'd possibly chip through the walls and peruse everything private and fragile, but until then they remained impenetrable.

---

The shackles chafed her skin. She could have asked for a cushioning charm, but she wanted to let them hurt. It reminded her that they'd attempted to steal her magic. They'd taken her

fangs and claws, leaving her defenceless.

She sat in a chair in the cold winter weather, wearing long black robes with a hood made of puffskein fur. Titus and Theo looked similar, wraiths sitting in the cold light.

Tabitha's extended family sat near them, giving the three of them a wide berth.

Maybe they sensed the tension. Brother next to brother, both silent, each drowning in their own grief. And next to them, an out of place muggleborn, wearing no expression.

Or maybe they felt the snapping magic around Titus. It brushed along her skin as one of her nephews spoke near the casket. Titus' eyes pierced the flowers spilling over the top.

He'd spared no expense. The best casket. The best floral arrangements. The best grave plot. But no amount of money could change the fact that Tabitha, the anchor of them, was gone forever.

Sometime toward the end, Titus' gloved hand clenched along his thigh. Watching him mourn felt like holding her breath under water. Lungs burning. The frantic scramble for oxygen. Titus glanced sideways and met her eyes, and she almost looked away after seeing the raw pain.

Tabitha might have been like a mother to her, but in many ways, she was more to Titus. Since his parents' death, she'd been his rock, the steady thing he'd leaned on when he had no one else.

*Theo's growing up. I'm getting old. What would he do if everyone he loved flew away?*

In a moment of uncomfortable horror, Hermione realised that Titus had no one now. Theo had a flat and a career separate from them. She had Draco. And now Tabitha was gone.

Who did he have left to love, besides Bitty and Eddy?

Despite her complicated negative emotions toward him, pity surged inside her, until it almost spilled out of her mouth in a torrent of hot coals and ash. She grieved for the boy Titus had been, orphaned, relying on his nanny to care for him.

They waited in frozen silence until the service ended. The cold wind whipped their cloaks around, but the three of them stayed still as the rest of her family mingled and talked and left. The gravesite owner came over.

"It's time for us to lower the casket."

"Give us a moment alone."

The owner left, seeming wary of the Butcher.

Once alone, Titus stood up and walked toward the casket. He laid a large, callused hand against the shiny, solid white and then he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the top and gave a gentle kiss to her final resting place.

The action pierced Hermione's soul.

Unable to sit any longer, she made her way beside Titus and Theo did too, standing on either side of him.

Theo placed a heavy hand on his brother's shoulder, who still pressed his forehead into the casket. Titus groaned with the physical comfort and dropped to his knees, eyes still shut. Hermione hesitated, but it hurt too much to see him so broken. She added her own hand on his shoulder. He felt so strong under her hand, but he trembled. Titus reached up and held her wrist, keeping it in place.

"Don't leave me yet," he said. "Give me thirty minutes for us to be together."

The bracelet she'd given him long ago remained on his wrist. The three strands, comprising them, still woven together. She allowed the moment of affection, standing on the cold ground in front of the casket to their surrogate mother.

When Titus stood, he kept one hand firmly on the casket, as if he might collapse again.

"I'll miss you. More than you can comprehend. I don't know what to do without you."

It could have been directed toward just Tabitha, but she thought it might be toward her and Theo too.

Grieving the loss of everyone he'd ever loved.

# Chapter 35: Fight or Flight

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Soap&Skin- "Me and the Devil"

Highreeve2022 wrote an amazing one shot called Nott Giving Into Temptation, imagining what would have happened if Titus had helped Hermione while dealing with the potion at Carrows party. The fics attached to House Pet will always appear on the bottom of the latest chapter.

Frau Blucher has created an amazing art piece of Hermione's fight against Blaise at the end of chapter 31. Go check it out!

A big thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for A+ editing skills.

Edit to add: I had a friend help me with the Russian spells, but they might be wrong. Feel free to correct it.

Trigger Warning at the bottom

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

## Fight or Flight

The icy wind numbed Hermione. She wished she could cry out her pain, but she only pressed her hand against the hard casing of Tabitha's coffin and whispered her thank-you — for loving a pathetic orphan girl, covered in mud, so traumatised she barely spoke. Tabitha's love had been given without question.

The sexton stood off to the side, giving them space, though he seemed anxious to finish the burial. Throughout the thirty minutes waiting at the graveside, the pain sloughed away from Titus in increments, leaving only a cold detachment.

He let go of the casket and backed away.

"I'm ready." He glanced at Theo, who gave a solemn nod, but when he turned to Hermione, he held her gaze as the sexton lowered the casket, Tabitha's body disappearing into the Earth.

Before she could turn away, he snatched her wrist. The sleeves of her cloak fell back, showing her shackles.

"You're not wearing the bracelet I made for you."

"I thought it would be inappropriate."



His lips thinned and pulled down at the corners.

"I embedded charms for protection. Extensive ones. It would make me feel better if you wore it. You never know what could happen."

"I don't—"

"Merlin, you're fucking stubborn."

He tugged on her wrist, and she stumbled into him, fitting naturally into his hold, head just below his chin. His strong arms tightened around her. The smell of him should have calmed her— a physiological response buried deep in her past— but she froze.

"I refuse to lose anyone else."

"Titus—" Theo warned.

Titus' hold didn't abate. "Wear the bracelet and stay safe."

He bunched the fabric of her cloak on her back in his fist, and she wondered if he'd ever let go on his own. Maybe he considered going against all the rules— throwing her over his shoulder to bring back to Nott manor. She almost panicked, claustrophobic at the thought.

But he managed to push her away.

"If you need *anything*, you know where to find me." He placed his hands on her shoulders, leaning down to her eye level. "I'll do everything in my power to help you. You know that, right?"

*For a price*, he left out. Titus' goodwill sometimes resembled a transaction, like the golden galleons tumbling from her hands. What Titus wanted in return was far more expensive than she'd originally thought, but to say it out loud would only encourage an argument. She refused to dishonour Tabitha's memory by causing a scene.

"Of course, I know that."

He searched her face. She wondered if he sensed the deceit like he always did. Eventually, he rested one hand on her cheek, stroking the bones below with his thumb. It took everything inside her not to throw it off in anger.

Titus laughed sharply, void of amusement. Then he gave a light pat to her cheek and turned toward Theo, dragging him into a sudden tight hug. Unlike her frozen response, Theo softened into his hold.

The brothers embraced each other until Titus tapped Theo's shoulder a few times.

"The offer is for you too. I'd like for you to stop by the manor for dinner." There was a desperate note to his voice he was unable to hide.

Theo hesitated, but promised to do just that as Titus backed away, getting ready to apparate.

"Goodbye, Titus," she said.

His eyes narrowed. "I'd say goodbye in return, but we can't both be liars."

He disappeared, and she didn't know if she should interpret his parting words as a threat, a warning, or a promise.

Long after leaving Tabitha's final resting place, the cold remained, burrowing into her bones.

---

Hermione tugged her cloak tighter, hating the omnipresent rain. She used a water-repellent charm while she navigated the streets of muggle London, but the droplets still managed to seep through.

The bell on the door jingled as she walked into the now-familiar shop. Amy stood at the till, wearing a new pink dress. Her cheeks sported a healthy tint, and her arms appeared less skeletal than the first time.

"Sofia!" Amy clasped her hands in excitement when Hermione pushed down the hood of her cloak. "I didn't think you'd make it."

"It's a perfect day to walk around." Less people around to observe is what Hermione left out. What she'd been doing wasn't illegal, but she'd probably still get in trouble, even disguised as a pureblood.

"Where's Susan?" Hermione asked. The other woman usually stood in the building too, though never greeted her with the same enthusiasm. A witch was a witch and couldn't be trusted, she'd told her once. Though Susan took her gold just the same.

"I'm not sure," Amy said, subdued from her initial excitement. "She's been fired, I think. It's — hard to keep steady employment. Most employers have little mercy for absences. Too many people are eager for work."

Hermione paused at the shocking news and then reached into her pocket, extracting a small bag, filled with some knuts and a few sickles, along with three galleons. Not as many as the first time. A giant amount of gold suddenly appearing in the muggle world might prove suspicious enough to warrant an investigation.

"That's a shame." Hermione didn't like the woman, but not enough to starve her. Hermione set the bag of money on the counter, the coins clinking against the hard surface. "You could possibly give some of this to her. At least, until she finds work."

A week after Tabitha's funeral, feeling weighed down with grief, she'd decided she needed to do *something*. If gold meant nothing to her, and everything to another person, then sharing it seemed the logical conclusion.

Amy and Susan almost had a heart attack when she appeared at the shop again, fearing retribution. It took a long time to convince both the women that she wanted to *help them*.

Her plan: use Susan and Amy to break the coins into smaller currency and deliver it to the people that needed it.

Three galleons. Once a week. It cost her nothing, except the risk of crossing into muggle London.

She lingered longer in the city each time. On one excursion, she'd actually found a nursery to corroborate her lie. Currently, she'd acquired several succulents and a potted bloodtwig dogwood, now rotting in the Malfoy greenhouse.

Amy grabbed the money bag and slid it under the counter with a conspiratorial wink.

"Thank you so much."

"You know I don't want your thank yous," Hermione reminded.

"You'll need to endure them regardless. One of my neighbours hurt his leg in an accident, and he has six children that are starving. Even a single coin will feed them for months. You're providing miracles. You know, the locals already call you Robin Hood."

Unease filled Hermione. She'd need a solution to mitigate the rumours before authorities caught them.

No matter how many times she'd heard of muggle hardships, it always shocked her to witness. As a child, she remembered being amazed at the amount of food presented at the Nott dining table, but she'd grown immune to the abundance. Hermione didn't even know the last time she'd truly been hungry, having no starting point to relate to the desperation surrounding her. The horror of watching a child starve to death seemed unfathomable.

Amy furrowed her brow.

"Are you sure you're not putting yourself in danger?"

"Don't worry about me."

Amy's shoulders relaxed, but Hermione didn't share her relief.

"Thank you again."

Hermione answered with a roll of her eyes and a wave, exiting the shop.

---

Hermione stepped through the floo to find Draco waiting for her. She almost tumbled back into the fireplace, not expecting him home. Instead of the yellow couches, he sat in a wingback chair, staring at her while taking a sip of whisky from a crystal tumbler.

"Come here," he said, voice lowered.

He knew about her excursions. She didn't know how he'd figured it out, but his demeanour reeked of hostility.

Why did she feel like a child caught stealing a handful of sweets?

She'd planned to tell him, of course, but each time she'd opened her mouth, the words stuck in her throat. What if he tried to stop her? It would only harm their budding relationship. She didn't want to ruin it with an argument.

The sides of his head were freshly shaved, the hair on top tousled and falling over his eyes, as if he'd been running his hands through it. He held himself like stone, besides setting his tumbler aside, and pressed two fingers to his cheek with legs spread, glancing up at her when she stood before him.

"I was going to tell—"

"*Sit down,*" he ordered.

Hermione hesitated, but lowered herself into his lap. She tried to sit sideways, but he grabbed her hips and yanked her around so that her back leaned against his chest. He spread her legs, resting them on either side of him.

"I've known," Draco whispered into her ear. He scrunched up the edge of her voluminous dress until it pooled around her waist, exposing her knickers, his fingers drumming against her bare thigh.

"How long?" Her breath hitched as he traced circles along her skin, going slowly upward.

"The whole time. I had Mipsy follow you, in case you ran into trouble. I've been waiting for you to tell me."

Should she be mad about that? Her instinct wanted to say yes, but she also knew letting her wander into Diagon Alley without intervening— and then into the muggle world— displayed a strong amount of self-control and trust.

He hadn't stopped her; he'd just added protections.

"So you're okay with—" his fingers brushed over her knickers, just firm enough to tease.

"It's the most idiotic thing you've ever done." He played with the edge of her knickers, pushing aside the silk just enough to stroke the hidden soft skin. "A part of me wants to show you how much it angers me— the other part is impressed at your continued recklessness. Will you ever stop risking your neck for degenerates?"

Hermione considered the question, but it was hard, because his fingers slipped past her knickers and rested over her clit. She leaned her head back, as he grasped her breast with his free hand and gently bit the curve of her neck.

"I have to help them." She disagreed with his assessment of her actions. What she was doing was the most important thing she could do. In general, Draco held no love for muggles. He found them interesting, but not enough to sacrifice for them.

At least, he didn't care enough about them to risk *her* safety.

Draco gave a huff. Possibly amused. Possibly exasperated. She didn't have time to dissect the sound, when he curled two fingers inside her, just as she'd taught him.

"Against my instinct, I won't stop you. I'll provide the required paperwork to avoid suspicion, but I'm going to continue sending Mipsy to follow you." He thrust his fingers hard into her, until she panted, stroking her clit with his thumb in intervals. "Why didn't you tell me from the beginning?"

She could swear she heard a note of hurt, but his fingers buried deep inside her distracted her. She pressed her hips down and up, forcing the movement she craved.

"I thought you'd make me stop."

His hand left her breast, grabbed her knee, and shoved her legs further apart and up, allowing him to get deeper.

"Granger," he whispered between nips on her shoulder. "I've already told you that I'll give you everything. That includes this, even though I think it's pointless altruism. We're—" A hard thrust of his fingers, almost painful. "A fucking team. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she cried, arching her back, chasing her pleasure.

She couldn't speak as he continued until she shattered against his hand. He gently pulled out of her, fixing her knickers and readjusting her skirt while she basked in her orgasm.

"You find it hard to trust me," he said, brushing her curls to the side. "Given your history and our situation, it's understandable, but that ends now. You're still living in survival mode. With me, you can just live."

The words made her want to freefall again, but she did catch the double standard. He wanted her to expose all of her vulnerabilities, trust him with everything, but she doubted he'd do the same. He still occluded around her.

"Okay," she decided. "No more secrets. This time for real."

She'd functioned so long hiding and sneaking around that she almost didn't know how to behave without it. But she was tired of living that way. So far he'd never taken anything, never denied her anything.

Maybe if she extended her trust, he'd do the same.

After recovering, she slipped out of his hold and fell to her knees, twisting toward him.

"I didn't mean for it to be reciprocated." He reached down to shove her away out of a misplaced chivalry. "This isn't quid pro quo." He sometimes reacted this way, as if making sure the act of giving him pleasure was of her own free will.

"A *team*, Malfoy," she mocked, grabbing his belt. "You make me feel good, and I do the same. It's what a relationship is about, correct?"

He tilted his head up, the tendons pronounced along the sides of his neck. And then he studied her, as if considering whether she meant it. What she offered was too great a temptation, and he buried his hands in her curls as she tugged his cock out, already hard. She licked her lips, staring up at him.

"You're only allowed to get on your knees for me." He groaned when she gave a teasing suck to the tip of his cock. "And only when you choose to."

"I'm doing this because I want to," she reassured him, as his hands tightened in her hair.

After that, his iron mask slowly fractured against her tongue.

---

Hermione's grief overwhelmed her at random times. Tabitha had never replaced her mother—no one could do that—but she had done the best she could in the circumstances.

While in her grey moods, Draco gave her space. He didn't quite know how to deal with her negative emotions, but neither did she.

Hermione sometimes found herself unable to concentrate on books or studies. Even her job, which normally filled her with joy, became monotonous with the heavy cloud following her.

The only thing that sparked life into her soul was the trips to muggle London. She mattered there in a way she'd never experienced. Every visit was vital to someone in the community—a child needing medicine, an elderly woman with no heat, a single mother desperate for formula. Her soul overflowed with satisfaction with each bag of coins.

Maybe even having freedom wasn't enough.

Perhaps to live a satisfying life, she needed a purpose too.

---

Two weeks later, Hermione bustled through the crowds of Diagon Alley. The bag of money jingled in her pocket with her polyjuice still in place. She might need a second dose, but she wished to get inside the Leaky before drinking, giving her as much time as possible in the muggle world.

As a surprise gift, Draco had given her the address to a property of his mother's—a townhouse in muggle London, protected by Fidelius charms. Unplottable. A perfect place to conduct her underground operation. He'd already added some of her blood to the wards. She planned to approach Amy with an offer to quit her job and move to the townhouse, giving her more security while dispersing the money.

The Leaky was packed with the lunch crowd, as dark and dingy as usual. The noise bounced off the walls. Hermione made her way around the people, staying close to the edge.

In the process, she accidentally barreled into a man travelling fast in the opposite direction. The force pushed her to the side in an alcove near the stairs. She fell hard to the floor, catching her descent with her wrists, throbbing in pain with the sharp landing.

The man loomed over her. He was burly with wide shoulders and a buzz cut. A scraggly beard went to his chest, and it looked as if a chunk had been taken out of his left eyebrow.

"Sorry about that," he said, holding out his hand. "Let me help you up."

Hermione grasped his beefy hand, ready to say thank you, but in his palm he carried a small object. The sharp point pricked her hand as it began to warm

In confusion, she attempted to tug away, but the man's grasp turned to stone.

She raised her left wrist prepared to curse him.

But it was too late.

He slammed the side of his fist against her temple.

The portkey in his hand activated, and they both disappeared.

---

They landed in a decrepit, abandoned flat with a bang, and Hermione briefly lost consciousness. Sharp flashes of pain stabbed her brain as he flung her over his shoulder, walking toward a new destination, wrenching whimpers from her with each step. He laid her on something she thought might be an old couch— a floral fabric, half-disintegrated, smelling of mould, with obvious holes from rats. She blinked, trying to focus on the details as he placed shackles on each wrist.

"Who are you?" she managed to get out. Once he stepped away, she placed a hand to her temple, coming back with a smear of blood.

Another two snaps of metal, and she realised he'd also shackled her ankles, attaching them to the couch leg.

"Don't move or speak." It didn't sound like a request. She sensed he'd use violence as a means for gaining obedience.

Instead, she took the time to study her surroundings— dilapidated floor boards, ancient peeling wallpaper, so dirty she couldn't make out the colour, and a cracked window. A lit up sign across the alley shone through the smudged glass. It had two words, with the first starting with a D, but the rest blurred from the window. Nothing much else occupied the room besides a rickety table and chairs with a large parchment on top— a map, she suspected, though she couldn't see it. A bundle of blankets and a ratty bag rested in one corner— her kidnapper's personal belongings.

After securing her, the man stood by the door, checking his watch. A minute later, he glared at her.

"I have to let someone inside. Don't try escaping. I've already checked for your wand, and the wards will alert me if you try to cross, so you won't get far. If I have to place you back in that spot, I'll break both your legs."

He didn't wait for her answer and walked out the door, slamming the door behind him. He seemed secure in the knowledge that she couldn't get out of her restraints.

What a fucking idiot.

Hermione waited until she heard his footsteps retreat, stomping down some stairs. Sensing no other charms attached to the metal, she twisted her wrist slightly and both unclickeed. She did the same to her ankles. Standing up, she groaned, throwing a numbing charm at her pounding head. She'd never been that great at healing spells, so it continued to throb as she walked to the window.

The sign across the alley became clear—Dystyl Phalangeas. Hermione recognized the name as a shop in Knockturn Alley, specialising in bones, fossils, and fangs, as well as selling furniture made from them.

The man hadn't brought her very far at all.

Like he'd warned, trying to escape would be pointless. She sensed the buzzing wards from where she stood. So she needed to find a way to alert Draco to her location. Her mind raced, as she considered and discarded ideas, until it left the obvious.

A body couldn't pass through the wards without detection— but a patronus might.

She'd never tried to cast the complicated spell without a wand. It took several desperate tries before managing a wisp. She almost cried in frustration with the failure, distracted by her pounding heart.

"Good thoughts," she pleaded with herself.

She concentrated on Draco's face. On watching him sleep. His severe expression softened into something it might have been without trauma— playful and hopeful. She imagined him without occluding, smiling just for her.

The luminous otter bounded out of her hands.

"I'm in Knockturn Alley," she whispered. "Across from Dystyl Phalangeas, and I'm being held hostage."

She assumed Mipsy had already informed him of the kidnapping. Did he get in contact with aurors? Was he searching Diagon Alley?

Worry plagued her as she gathered what magic she could, trying to clear her mind of fear and focus her intent. After ordering the Patronus to find Draco, she watched it bound away, passing through the walls. It disappeared down the alley and beyond her senses, severing most of her contact with it. She hoped no one saw the otter, and that it had been powerful enough to reach its destination, but she couldn't linger at the window.

Several deep voices spoke just outside the room. They argued in another language— Russian, she thought. Hermione scrambled back into her restraints, attempting to be as quiet as possible as they clicked closed again.



Just in time.

Her kidnapper opened the door, walking inside, followed by strangers— all wizards with their robes and wands.

A pale man entered right behind her captor with a bald head shiny enough it reflected the dull light. Something about him seemed off, detached and stony-eyed, and her instincts flared. Behind him, another man pushed through, skinny and tall, with a beaked nose and wiry grey hair. The third was much shorter than the others, shivering in fear after scurrying inside, exposing oddly large front teeth.

The final man's slow, heavy footsteps heralded his arrival, and when he lowered his hood, she recognized him immediately. Karkaroff— the former headmaster of Durmstrang. He'd been at the Yule Ball, standing next to his horde of red-uniformed boys, looking as severe as his charges. Several years ago, the authorities had discovered he'd been selling government secrets to the Order— or to anyone willing to pay him better. She'd overheard Titus discussing him through floo, but thought nothing of it.

Since then, he'd managed to evade arrest. She'd seen his wanted posters plastered across Diagon Alley.

But none of that explained his presence here, or why they'd kidnapped her.

After entering the room, Karkaroff's cold blue eyes stuck to her in a way that reminded her of Dolohov, intelligent and assessing, though perhaps less imposing. A goatee lined his jaw, covering a weak chin, and she could see his yellow teeth from where she sat. He carried a heavy black bag over his shoulder that he kept pressed to his side.

"I thought I told you to stay ahead of me," he barked. Reaching behind him, he yanked a woman forward by her dark hair, yelping in pain.

As she stumbled into the filthy room, the woman lifted her face to reveal Susan, trembling like a leaf, face wet with tears. One eye bloomed with a dark bruise.

"Is this the girl?" Karkaroff asked.

Hermione felt the instant slap of betrayal.

"Y—yes." Susan sobbed. "She's been giving us gold. Lots of it. Please, don't kill me. I have —"

Karkaroff backhanded her, and Susan collapsed to the floor with the force, clutching her cheek and scooting to a corner.

"Please," she screamed. "Mercy."

"Your voice is particularly annoying, and I find I have no more use for you. Silence her, Dmitry," Karkaroff ordered.

The pale man's eyes lit up with the task. He reached down to his thigh and extracted a large, gleaming hunting knife, similar to the one Titus owned. Dark magic rolled off it, created for torture.

"Come here, pretty," Dmitry taunted, stalking toward the screaming woman.

Hermione tugged on her chains in an instinct to help, but there was nothing to do as the man grabbed Susan's hair. She kicked and pleaded, but it didn't stop the sudden, practised stab of the knife up into her carotid artery, followed by a spray of blood as he tugged it out. Susan's limbs spasmed with death, hands grasping her killer's forearms, until she lost consciousness. Blood kept spraying everywhere, covering Dimitry, and the wall near them.

"Ah, people are the most beautiful as they die." Dmitry leaned forward and captured her dying gasps with a kiss.

Hermione wished to vomit with what she'd seen. Blood seeped everywhere, more than she thought possible, pouring into the rotten floor below. She glanced up to find Karkaroff studying her.

"No need to fear us." Karkaroff flicked his wand, erasing the blood — as if that was the part that scared her. Dmitry had discarded Susan's body in the corner. "She was just a muggle, love. If you prove useful, I plan to obliviate you and set you free. Now let's discuss the galleons you've been... dispersing. "

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Karkaroff tutted. "Not a wise start."

Hermione bit her tongue. Her head felt woozy from panic, but somehow she kept control of herself.

*It's not real, she lied to herself. It's just a movie. Or a nightmare.*

"I found this on the girl." The burly man that kidnapped her reached in his pocket and threw a leather pouch at Karkaroff who caught it mid-air.

Her galleons— he must have taken it from her pocket when she'd been unconscious. Karkaroff opened it, giving a hum at what he found.

"See, my dear, there's no point in lying. Did you find anything else?"

"Some scrap parchment, her identity papers, and a small flask."

He meant the parchment with the address Draco had given her. It featured the same charms she'd used on the message scroll she'd given Dean, making it impossible to read without her touch.

"Who is she?"

"Sofia Romano."

"I don't recognize that name."

"Some Italian pureblood. Maybe a halfblood." Her kidnapper handed over her identity papers. Karakoff grabbed them, studying them with his cold eyes. "Not from one of the important families. She works for Malfoy, the younger one."

"Why would she come to England?"

"Probably lack of job opportunities," the tall man with wiry grey hair spoke. He had a surprisingly soft voice. "Italy's economy is in crisis, especially after the last snap."

The last snap?

"Where's her wand, Johnson?"

"I don't know." Her kidnapper shrugged. "Must have fallen when we portkeyed."

Kakaroff scowled in fury. "That was sloppy. Give me the flask."

After producing the flask, Johnson handed it to Karkaroff, who uncapped it. "Dimitry, what is it?"

The pale, bald man grabbed the flask and took a deep sniff. "Polyjuice."

All of the eyes in the room stared at her.

"So not Sofia, after all." Karkaroff walked over to the rickety table and set her bag of galleons on the surface, staring at the map laid out with a frown. "Which makes more sense. After all, if she'd arrived in England for a better life, then where would she be getting galleons enough for the muggles? It might also explain her lack of a wand. Now the remaining question—who is hiding behind the pretty face?"

"I don't like this." The ratlike man still trembled near the door, eyeing Susan's body, showing her death had disturbed him too.

"Quiet," Kakarroff ordered, making an awful noise while sucking on his upper teeth. "The girl wouldn't tell us the truth. I don't have veritaserum, and I'm not skilled enough a legilimens to avoid causing damage to her brain, which would render this whole endeavour useless. We need her gold, or have you forgotten what will happen to us if we don't pay back our debts?" The men all shared glances of worry.

"We could always torture it out of her," Johnson suggested.

"Let me," Dmitry volunteered. "I could make her sing so prettily."

"Patience." Karkaroff tilted his head in thought. "There's no need for force. It will fade soon enough. While we wait, let's go over our plans again, because we don't have room for errors."

Hermione breathed through her terror as the four of them gathered around the table. She pushed down the useless response, trying to remember all of Titus' lessons.

*Before attempting to fight or escape, analyse all the advantages and disadvantages and take the easiest route.*

Advantage number one— they needed to wait for her polyjuice to fade, giving her time to think of a plan.

Advantage number two— she'd been able to send a patronus. Whether it made contact was a mystery, which meant she couldn't count on it to help her escape.

Advantage number three— and possibly the greatest of them— they didn't know about her wandless magic. The shackles on her wrists and ankles resembled the ones in the ministry. They hindered the movement of her wrists, which dampened her ability, but they weren't obsidian.

The disadvantage— they outnumbered her five to one. They possessed wands and had greater physical strength, so her only true advantage would be surprise.

As they began arguing in Russian again, Hermione chewed on her bottom lip. She didn't think any of them were Russian, besides Dmitry and perhaps Karkaroff, but they all spoke the language fluently, other than the small, shivering one.

No one seemed to be paying attention to her.

Titus' advice once again rang in her ears: *in an emergency, use your environment for weapons. If your enemies expect your right hand, then shock them with your left.*

Without a wand, she'd need to reserve her energy. Using curses would tire her out, affecting her magical core. Even if the fight didn't kill her, it might overextend her magic and cause her to pass out.

No, she needed to kill in ways that didn't require dark magic or excess energy.

Hermione searched the room, trying to see it in a new light.

During her inspection, her eyes snagged on a floorboard, warped and weathered, and an idea came to her.

She had no weapons, but she could create them.

After a quick look up, she placed her hand down and concentrated her magic. Using only a little bit, she popped a sharp shard of wood out, making a small cracking noise

Hermione glanced up to see if anyone had noticed, but they still huddled around the map, deep in discussion.

Assured no one saw, she worked several out, and with a crook of a finger, they tumbled across the floor toward her, residing in a little pile behind her feet.

The giant splinters might not kill, but if she aimed for the face, it might incapacitate them enough to escape.

She needed something else, a plan B.

Her first idea was to use the glass from the window, but she discarded it after considering it might be too obvious to gather. The next plan didn't come to her for several minutes, until she placed a palm on the couch, slipping right through a rotting hole. She cringed with the feeling, tugging it back out. Slimy dust lingered on her finger, and she swiped it on her dress.

Staring at the goo, inspiration struck a second time.

Hermione focused on the organic matter, filtering out the rest of the world to hone her intent. Placing her hand above the hole, she ordered it to bend to her will with a subtle twist of her wrist. The slimy mould obeyed her summons easier than the splinters. It pooled up like a tiny river, sucked from the depths of the couch. A black gelatinous puddle grew larger until she gathered it and hid it under the sofa next to the splinters.

She tried to think of something else, but she'd run out of time. They had stopped arguing and were now looking over at her.

"Bring the girl here," Kakaroff demanded.

Johnson huffed, but he walked over, leaned down, and undid her ankle shackles. "No fighting," he warned. "Or I'll make you regret it."

She gave a sharp nod, faking submission.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her to her feet. She refused to look at Susan's corpse as she passed. Dragging her across the room, Johnson shoved her into a chair at the table.

Like she thought, the parchment laid out proved to be a map of the continents of Asia and Europe. A thick red line encircled most of both, outlining odd boundaries that didn't match country borders. On one side, the line encircled the United Kingdom, bisecting the ocean, but as it slid down the coast of France, it zigzagged onto land. From there, it slashed across upper Spain, travelling through the Mediterranean, cutting off the tip of Italy and then right into the middle of Turkey and Iran. Other countries seemed to be severed as well, including China and Russia.

Within the red line were pins of different colours she didn't understand, along with places shaded in grey, including big swaths of land in China, Russia, Greece, Turkey, and Italy.

"Curious, are you?" Kakaroff noticed her interest.

"What do you want with me?"

"The lies you're concealing intrigue me," he admitted. "But I can overlook a few secrets. Tell me where you're getting the galleons, then lead me to them, and I'll think about releasing you right now before your polyjuice fades. No harm done. I'd even let you take a sip of potion to prolong the disguise. You see, I need the money, and if I don't have it in my hands soon, I'll get... resourceful."

"Malfoy gives me a stipend to buy plants in the muggle world. I can't get any more."

Kakaroff snorted. "Even if that were true, the Malfoys are notoriously stingy, despite their obscene wealth. There's no way he doesn't see the discrepancy of payment. To further that, Malfoy certainly wouldn't care for charity— unless it benefited him. You work at Draco's apothecary, but he also wouldn't pay you that amount just for plants, especially since— if my sources are correct— you just began working there."

A lie paired with the truth.

"I'm— well, if you must know, I'm sleeping with him."

"That's more believable. A bag of galleons for a tumble in bed. I never thought he'd need a whore." His eyes studied her, and then he landed on the side of her face. "Ah, now it finally fades. I suppose it's too late for deals. Let's see who you are under the surface."

Hermione stood up and tried to back away, but the burly man grabbed her shoulders and forced her back down again.

The change was sudden. Her hair lengthened into a mass of curls, skin turning golden, even under the dull light. When she finally morphed back into her own body, Karakoff grinned in delight.

"Oh my, this is much better than a few bags of galleons."

"Who is she?" Johnson asked.

"We have in our possession a little mudblood. And not just any mudblood, but Draco Malfoy's breeder—the one that killed Fenrir as a mere scrap of a girl." His head tipped back as he laughed loudly. The sound grated her nerves. "It seems she's been a naughty little girl, pilfering from the potion room, or maybe he's idiotic enough to loosen her leash. Either way, it matters not to me. I don't question my luck."

Hermione glared at him.

"Are we going to ransom her back to Malfoy?" The wiry grey haired man asked.

"That would be far too dangerous. No—" he looked her up and down as if she was a treasure. "He can't know we have her. And neither can the Order. All traces of her must vanish. Pettigrew, I want you to go to Bulgaria and get in contact with the Krum family. Show them your memories. I think they'd be interested in our little captive for *personal* reasons. I need an important favour from them, and if they offer a sufficient amount, it would be advantageous to trade."

"I don't feel good about this." The rat man trembled. "My boss has been searching for her too. He says that she's—"

"If I discover you've told your *boss*, I'll let Dmitry hunt you down and allow him to do whatever he wants with you."

Pettigrew visibly swallowed.

Boss? Hermione wondered who he talked about. Did Pettigrew work for the Order, only following Karkaroff as an in-between? She had nothing to base it on, but that conclusion felt false.

"Understand. I'll go right away." Pettigrew shivered, skin rippling, and he shrunk down, down, down, until all that was left of him was a rat.

An animagus! It made sense. Humans tended to resemble their animal form.

The rat scampered out of the room, twisting around the bald man's feet, disappearing out of the room.

"I still think we should ransom her back to Malfoy. Imagine how much they'd pay us." Johnson's eyes nearly twinkled at the idea.

"Threatening the Malfoys would be suicide," Karkaroff responded. "Besides, they aren't the only wealthy men. Do you know how high the bids would be for her at the markets in the East? In several countries, muggleborns are harder to find than here, since they aren't as corralled. They hide in the country and in caves or the mountains. It leaves them in a crisis, which works in our favour. And this muggleborn is truly a rose among thorns— young, pretty, and if the rumours are true, powerful. She's not a virgin, so that would bring the price down a bit, but the old families in the East are desperate enough it won't matter. They'd pour out their vaults for access to her womb. After this, we wouldn't have to work ever again. We could move to central Europe and retire."

That seemed to soothe the even seemed to get more excited, exchanging greedy glances.

Hermione's head pounded and her stomach lurched. Karkaroff planned to *sell* her. If they managed to smuggle her out of wizarding England, she suspected she'd never get back.

Like fuck they would.

She'd rather die.

"What if she's pregnant?" Dimitry asked.

Karkaroff narrowed his eyes, considering the question. "We'll eliminate the problem, of course. Perhaps we should go ahead and check—"

"Shit!" Johnson had been leaning against the table, but he snapped straight.

"What is it?"

"I thought I felt—" his brow furrowed. "I'm not quite sure what it was. I think a cat went through the wards, but something felt odd about it. Perhaps I should go check."

"No, I need your brain to plan. August—" Karkaroff motioned to the wiry grey haired man. "Go see if it was just a cat."

"On it." The man left, closing the door behind him. The thump of his boots followed him down the stairs.

They waited in silence. In the interim, Hermione studied the map, wondering at what it meant, while Kakaroff took a scroll out of his bag, along with a quill and ink pot.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Writing to your prospective owners. Also, I'm getting into contact with several auction houses, to see who offers me a better deal."

"Are auctions for muggleborns common?"

"You ask too many questions." Karkaroff raised an eyebrow, but he indulged her. "In most of the countries, your kind are sold off at auction. English wizards think they're superior to that, but the Trials aren't much different."

Despite the disturbed feeling at the thought, she agreed with him. Stripped of the decorations, the Trials usually boiled down to humans being bought and sold like livestock, since many were rigged toward the highest bidder. In the end, the result was the same— sold, bred, and used on a whim.

His mood had improved since her true identity had been revealed. But she'd only asked the questions to distract him from a single splinter rolling toward her. The wood resisted her, so she only tugged at one. She grit her teeth, focusing her concentration.

A crash startled her from her task, and Karkaroff slammed down his quill as a ball of orange hurtled through the broken window.

Crookshanks gracefully landed in the mouldy room, carrying a fat rat, limp in his jaws.

Hermione had never seen an animal more beautiful. She bit her lip to prevent herself from calling to him. What was he doing here? And how did he find her? She wished to cuddle him to her chest, but knew it was necessary to pretend she didn't know him.

Kakaroff gave an amused laugh and went back to work. "There's the cat. Dmitry, go and retrieve August from his fruitless search."

Hermione kept staring at Crookshanks, and at the unconscious rat still dangling from its mouth. A shocking revelation hit her.

"Is that Pettigrew?" Hermione whispered, placing a hand over her mouth.

As if he'd heard his name, the rat began to squirm. Crookshanks gave a violent shake of his head, placed his paw on the rat's belly, and ripped at its throat.

At the same time, Dmitry opened the door, but something blocked his way.

Right behind the framing, August dangled from a rope attached to the ceiling. His chest, face, and neck looked like a pincushion, fountains of blood spurting out, haemorrhaging. Still



alive, with the rope cinched tight around his neck, he opened a tongueless mouth and gave a strangled groan.

Dmitry raised his wand with a shout, but he was too late. A figure stepped out of the shadows.

"Bombarda!" The red curse hit Dmitry in the chest, exploding his body with the impact, splattering hot flesh and blood around the room. A finger landed on her foot, and she shoved it away with a surprised shout.

She had no time to contemplate the impossibility that the shredded flesh around her had once belonged to a *person*, because another curse hurtled over her head. Rebounding from a protego, it smacked against the wall toward the window.

The figure stepped out of the shadows. She recognized the Death Eater mask, the carving and etching. The colour was normally a silver so bright it glinted in the light. Soaked in blood, he resembled a demon. Crimson dripped from his dark cloak, as if he'd bathed in it.

Malfoy had come for her.

"Let her go," Draco warned. "Or I'll rip you both apart."

"Portkey the girl," Kakaroff bellowed, flinging his own curse that Draco sidestepped. "I'll kill him."

The words shook her out of her frozen trance. When Johnson attempted to grab her, she collapsed to the floor, ducking under his burly arms. She crawled, scraping her knees, intending to reach the window.

But before she could get far, August grabbed her ankle, dragging her toward him across the rotten floor. He reached into his robes, probably to grab his portkey.

Something snapped in her mind. A survival instinct she didn't know she possessed.

*He wasn't going to take her anywhere.*

With a twist, she swung her opposite leg around and kicked him across the face. His head snapped back, and his nose crunched with the impact.

"Fucking bitch!" He clutched his bleeding wound. Chaos surrounded them as Draco and Karkaroff battled. Blood and smoke and body parts. Red and green curses snapping around the room. But the threat of Johnson and the portkey still hovered over her. "When we get to our destination, I'm going to break your legs like I promised."

The illegal portkey now rested in his hand— a small, innocuous toy figurine. If he managed to touch her with it, she'd be gone forever.

"There's one problem with your plan." Hermione released her shackles. They clicked off, thumping on the floor. "I'm a fucking *witch*!"

Fully in control of her magic, she twisted her wrist and flung the gelatinous mass of mouldy slime through the air, right into his bloody face. He opened his mouth to shout, but it was a mistake. The viscous liquid sucked down his throat, into his nose, into his ears— an impenetrable mask.

He grasped at his throat, trying to swipe off the slime, but Hermione dug up more and more mould from the floorboards and couch, black and green rivers travelling up his body. He toppled backward, fighting the substance.

Hermione continued to pour the slime into his mouth until he stopped moving, until his legs stopped kicking. When his boots twitched and then stilled, she scrambled back on her hands and knees, dry heaving against the floor.

She'd *killed* someone.

And not just by accident.

Hermione paused her blind panicked crawl with sudden shock.

In her line of sight, right under the window, was Pettigrew's body, blood leaking out of his severed throat. After death, an animagus always transformed back into a human. Crookshanks still had one paw on his head, giving a meow.

"Good boy," she whispered, still feeling dizzy and panicked.

Understanding that she had to get a grip, Hermione slapped her cheek and jumped to her feet. Adrenaline alone kept her moving as she turned to see Draco and Karkaroff duelling.

Draco's left arm hung loose by his side, probably injured, but he ducked and twisted, using the door as a shield, and blocking with a protego as beautifully as Titus. The mask had fallen off, showing his pale features coloured bright red with splattered blood.

However, Karkaroff had been the headmaster of Durmstrang, and it showed. His spells shot out like lightning, most barked in Russian, making it impossible to anticipate.

Draco managed to throw her a hard look between his protegos, then glancing toward the window. *Escape*, it screamed.

She thought about it. Perhaps she was a distraction.

But she wouldn't run from this fight, leaving Draco alone. He'd insisted they were a team, and she'd never been a coward.

Hermione dredged up her last bit of magic, knowing she had one more weapon left to use, however minor.

"Catch," she shouted.

With a swoop of her wrist, she lifted the splintered wood under the couch in the air and shot it all toward Karkaroff. He blocked the missiled fragments, but not the giant splinter that she'd

started to roll toward him earlier. That one shot up from near his feet, impaling his eye.

As Karkaroff turned in his agony, the curse that had been directed toward Draco twisted toward her.

Hermione had no energy left to deflect or shield. She meant to flatten herself, but it was too late. The curse slammed into her forehead; she flipped in the air and smacked into the wall, crumpling to the floor, unable to move.

"Granger!" Draco slashed his wand, and the Durmstrang headmaster crashed into the floor face first in an Incarcerous, still moaning in pain.

With the threat eliminated, Draco sprinted toward her, leaping over Johnson's dead body.

When he reached her, he fell to his knees and lifted her gently off the floor. She gasped with the movement. The tang of iron flooded her mouth, and she spit out a mouthful of blood.

"Fuck," he said. "What curse did he use?"

"It was in Russian." Hermione spat another mouthful of crimson. "Did you get my Patronus?"

"No." He tried to grin but failed. "I had a trace on you, of course. Do you think I'd let you wander without one? As soon as Mipsy verified that you'd been— well, I used Crooks as a lure to separate them. And then I dumped a bucket of that fucker's blood over me to confuse the wards so I could slip inside."

"Always clever," she teased, but her voice was weak, and her skin throbbed as the curse spread.

It started as a tickle. An uncomfortable scrape against the skin. A deeper gnawing. For a moment, she marvelled at the magic, finding it similar to the dark patronus of Dolohov's— a shadow crossing the threshold into reality, capable of true pain.

Nothing tangible appeared on her skin, but she felt the invisible insects crawling along the surface. Within seconds, it covered her whole body. Soon their fangs pierced into her to the bone, over and over, until it grew unbearable. She writhed in Draco's arms.

"Get them off," she begged.

"There's nothing on you."

Karkaroff began to laugh, howling within his binds.

"It's going to kill the girl without intervention," he explained. "It's a nerve spell. The sensations will change and get worse. If you want her to survive, you'll need a countercurse that only I know, along with intense care under the guidance of a healer." He paused. "Or perhaps we could avoid that messy business and make a deal. Her life for mine."

Draco's helpless expression slid off, replaced with his cold mask. He stood, setting her down gently.

"Is that how you think this is going to go?" Draco walked toward Karkaroff slowly. When he got to him, he grabbed him up by his hair, showing off his ruined eye with a splinter still embedded. "You think I'd ever set you free after you planned to sell her to the highest bidder? After you stole what's *mine*?"

Draco must have been listening to the conversation the whole time. She wondered how long he'd spied on them before intervening.

"I think you're intelligent enough to see the easiest solution."

Draco didn't react at first, and she thought he might take the deal, if only to get her help faster, but his grip tightened. He flipped Karkaroff over with a violent tug and straddled his waist.

"Accio knife." Dmitry's blade, which had been flung across the room with the bombardo, zipped into his hand. It pulsed with nefarious energy. "Here's how it's really going to go." Draco placed the dark blade to Karkaroff's neck. "If you don't tell me the countercurse, and she *dies*, I'll keep you alive. For weeks. For months. For *years*. I'll use stasis spells and hire healers to keep you from dying as I practise every grotesque curse I've ever learned. You'll be my test subject for the worst dark magic potions. Let me be clear: the only mercy you will ever have from me will be if you tell me what I need to know right now, and then I'll grant you a swift demise."

"Just think—" Karkaroff's words cut off with a cry, as the tip of the knife slit down his front, cutting through the robes and the first layer of skin.

"The only thing I want you to talk about is the countercurse."

"I'll never tell you."

Draco slipped off his dark cloak, rolling up his sleeves. When he grinned, he showed his straight white teeth, a predator with blood splattered across his face.

"Let's test your resolve." Draco began to cut and slice and stab at various points, as if he already knew all the places to wound without killing— taking off fingers, carving off one ear, scalping off half his hair.

Hermione had to look away, feeling sick at the sight, writhing in increasing agony from the curse. Unending screams filled the room, as Draco mutilated him with meticulous precision. At one point, he made a deep slit down the abdomen. As if it was an overripe fruit, the skin peeled in two, exposing the organs below. Draco dug his bare hands into the innards and extracted what she thought was the liver. "This looks important." He laughed and threw it to the side. Karkaroff's eyes rolled to the back of his head, but Draco tapped his temple with his wand with a rennervation spell. "Oh no, It's not time to sleep yet."

It took two more extracted organs, before Karkaroff cracked.

"Kill me," he groaned. "Kill me."

Relief spread through Hermione, knowing both their tortures drew to a close.

Draco had been in the middle of unravelling the man's intestines, sliding them out of his stomach inch by inch. He placed them down, blood covering his arms up to his elbows. "You know what I want, and it will all be over."

"Ubiytza Nervov," he panted. "The curse is from my father's grimoire. The countercurse is Istselit' Povrezhdeniya. Please, no more."

"Any special movements?"

"A slash down, then a figure eight."

"Let's see if you deserve my mercy." Draco pointed his wand at her and completed the countercurse as instructed. The invisible insects disappeared, but the remnants of pain remained. Blood still pooled in her mouth at a disturbing rate. She feared she would die, despite reversing it.

"It's gone." She barely had the energy to whisper.

Draco seemed to sense the urgency. He placed both hands on either side of Karkaroff's head, so brutalised she almost didn't recognize him as human.

"I wish I had longer to make you suffer." Draco looked up and held her stare as he gave a sudden, vicious twist, followed by a sickening snap.

Karkaroff went limp, his neck broken.

As he stood up, Draco cleaned his bloody hands, and then pulled a small satchel from his cloak pocket— his usual potions bag— expanding it on contact.

Her eyelids wanted to close. A deep exhaustion took over. Black spots marred her vision, but she knew if she gave in, she might not wake up.

"Hold on, Granger."

He set the bag beside her, kneeling again. He pulled out a vial labelled Sunrise powder and uncapped it.

"This should help with the pain and keep your heart going. Open your mouth."

She struggled to obey him, but when she managed, more blood poured out.

"Fuck," he said. "Swallow it."

Her lips closed around the vial, and she did her best to swallow as he poured it, but she choked, coughing half of it back up.

Draco held her to his chest, and she whimpered in pain. Crookshanks purred at his feet, mouth stained crimson from Pettigrew's blood, following them as they made their way out of

the room.

"Just stay with me until I can get out of the wards and to St. Mungos. Ignore any visions from the powder. They aren't real."

Sunrise powder was a powerful hallucinogen when taken at the amounts she did. The ancients used to use it in rituals, thinking it produced visions of the future.

When the first apparition appeared, it was real enough she almost screamed. As they walked past August's corpse, still hanging behind the doorway, he lifted his limp head and bellowed.

On the stairs, her old nanny rose out of the rotten wood, grey and feeble.

"Tabitha," Hermione cried, but the image disintegrated.

When they exited the building into Knockturn Alley, Draco's footsteps quickened into a sprint. And she was glad for it, for a mound of severed heads rolled down the alleyway toward them— one of them her father's.

"You've betrayed me," he accused, flesh falling off him to the stones below. "You've forgotten who you are."

"No." She shook her head. "I haven't. Please, I love you still."

She screamed and screamed. Wanting to cry. Wanting to purge herself. Wanting to reattach his head to his body.

"Granger," Draco whispered. "It's not real."

She glanced up to him to find the angel-monster from her nightmares. His skin shone like a sun, illuminating off him, splashed with red, and his teeth sharpened into points.

She struggled against him, wishing to flee the terror.

"Whatever you're seeing isn't real."

But Hermione's nightmare and her reality mixed together, like smeared paint on canvas.

It became too much. The exhaustion won. She sank into the depths of the abyss.

Behind her closed eyes, she saw herself roaming amongst decomposing corpses and ruined buildings, floating a feather above it all. Dark shadows flowed out of her, streaming from her hands. As she walked, the ground seeped crimson, swallowing her feet, rising into a river of blood.

And around her, the world burned.

Art by [Frau Blucher](#)



## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: kidnapping, graphic depictions of violence, torture, death.

# Chapter 36: A Rat in a Cage

## Chapter Notes

Thank you MyPrivateInsanity for helping me edit this chapter!

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

### A Rat in a Cage

Hermione woke up to a figure hovering over her with a halo of light surrounding his long blond hair.

The angel-monster from her nightmares.

Even without him speaking, she heard Lucius' voice echoing in her mind, threatening her father, planning to take her mother, telling the werewolf to do as he wished. For the first time in years, she remembered that night as a whole instead of in fragments.

What he'd done was unforgivable, and she hated that he'd ultimately gotten what he'd wanted.

"Get away from me." Unfortunately, she couldn't move to retreat from him

"I forbid you to descend into pointless hysterics," Lucius answered. "You're fortunate I even entertain this foolishness, and you're equally fortunate Draco cared enough to counteract the curse before it did permanent damage. Very few survive the dark variations of it without becoming mentally incapacitated, and Karkaroff's was known to be fatal."

The nerve curse. She remembered now. Draco had given her sunrise powder, and her mind had produced horrid visions—the corpse groaning in the doorway, Tabitha rising from the stairs, and her father's head rolling down the alleyway.

And then the final vision of walking through a bloody and burning world. She knew logically it had been fake, but it had felt too visceral to forget.

All night, she'd dreamed of her father. First with nightmares, where he'd died over and over, no matter how hard she tried to save him. Throughout each one, he seemed disappointed, as if he'd wanted so much more for her.

As her dreams went on, her mind dredged up deep memories. Her father reading her a bedtime story. A kiss on her cheek from her mother. A whispered prayer before dinner. Simple, ordinary moments that her brain had stored away until now. It might be easy to dismiss them as unimportant, but a life is nothing but a sum of such simple moments.

She had been loved as a child. No one could tell her differently. Desperately, achingly loved.



Her clearest memory had been at a creek. Hermione didn't remember why they'd gone there, only that she'd had fun. After jumping in the water, she'd gotten her dress wet and thought she'd get in trouble, but her mum only gave her a cheeky grin and splashed her again.

Later, at the edge of the water, she'd found a feather and held it up with her pudgy, dirty hands, running towards her father, shoving it to his chest.

"Daddy, look what I found!"

Her father had twirled it between two fingers, showing off the array of colours— white, yellow, and black.

"This is a message."

"A message?"

"Yes," her father hid his grin. "Each feather you find means something different."

"What is this one?"

"A goldfinch. Endurance on a long journey, I think. Perhaps you're about to go on an adventure. Keep it safe with you always."

Hermione had jumped up and down in excitement, grabbing her treasure and holding it close.

Now awakened, the precious memories slipped through Hermione's fingers like sand. A deep yearning poisoned her, wanting a piece of time forever lost.

Something the man hovering over her had stolen.

She *hated* him. And she hated that his son looked like him. She wished Lucius' appearance matched his cruel soul.

"Am I in St. Mungo's?"

"You are, though we had requested to bring you to the manor with a hired healer. They convinced Draco that they still need to watch your progress."

Lucius didn't elaborate why Draco would rather she heal in private, and she was too exhausted to create theories.

Hermione tried to raise a hand to her forehead to soothe the ache, but her wrists were weighted down. She managed to hide her surprise that the Obsidian shackles once again were snapped around her wrists, smothering her magic. At some point, Draco must have put them on.

Lucius curled his upper lip in disgust at her and cast several diagnostic charms, each flashing the correct colour, indicating she was healing. However, when he passed his wand over her head, it glowed pale red.

"You still need several more doses." Lucius grabbed an amber potion and placed it to her lips. She shivered at his proximity, but she drank it. It was foul, and she fought the desire to spit the nasty concoction back out. "This needs to enter the bloodstream every thirty minutes or the remaining damage will be finite."

"Every thirty minutes?" Hermione asked in surprise. "How long have I been healing?"

"Days," he answered. "And there will be a day more yet, I believe."

She assumed the intensive healing required for the curse contributed to the high death toll.

"Why are you the one giving me potions? Where's Draco, and where are the healers?"

"Draco didn't trust the potency of St. Mungo's potions or that they'd give the level of care necessary for a full recovery. This is of his own creation." Lucius nodded toward the empty vial, now on a table near the bed.

The potion began to work. It burned her veins, increased her headache, and made her limbs too heavy to move.

"So are you saying that Draco's been giving me *every* dose himself?"

Lucius glared at her, as if he blamed her for everything wrong. "He hasn't slept in days, force feeding you the potion when you struggled against the treatment, saving your silly little brain. I've told him that his efforts are excessive and unnecessary for a breeder, but he's determined to have you make a full recovery."

Lucius pointed to the other side of the room, and she finally noticed Draco sprawled on the chair in the corner, blond head tilted back, arms to the side. Even in sleep, he looked exhausted. His clothes rumpled. Skin pale, leached of colour.

She imagined Draco forcing a potion down her throat every thirty minutes for days, delirious and ill with sleep deprivation. The only person he'd trusted to take over the task was his horrid father.

Warmth invaded her chest, an itchy feeling. It spread along her ribs, tumbling down into her stomach. She almost rubbed her sternum to chase away the odd ache. She'd experienced it around Draco frequently, but this time it sank deeper.

"Can I have food?"

"Not yet," he said. "In fact, I insist you sleep. I do not wish to converse with you."

She almost informed him that he was the last person in the world that she wanted to talk to as well, and *in fact*, she might hate him more than anyone, besides Blaise. She'd never forgive him for what he did to her parents, or for what he'd planned to do to her, and he was an evil, irredeemable monster.

But, as if sensing her disdain, Lucius tapped her forehead with his wand, and she collapsed into sleep.

This time, free of nightmares or memories.

---

When she woke up again, Titus sat in a chair beside her, arms crossed along his wide chest. Uncharacteristic scruff lined his jaw, and he seemed worn down, eyes duller than normal. He wore his auror uniform with his heavy armour underneath, Mediator badge shining bright gold.

A serious visit, then.

Hermione didn't bother pretending to sleep. He'd know.

"Sprite." His voice was rough.

She took a deep breath, staring at the man who she'd loved for most of her life. His face was set in a deep scowl.

Hermione tried to shrug off her exhaustion, knowing she'd need her mental capabilities for the conversation ahead.

"Where's Draco?"

"Malfoy made the mistake of returning to the manor for more potion."

Normally a very secure place, St. Mungo's forbade visitors without patient or family approval — unless it was auror business. That superseded patient confidentiality.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked.

Her headache had abated, but sharp pains now ripped down her throat, and hunger seized her stomach.

But Hermione didn't want to entertain small talk. "Are you on duty?"

"Not officially, though the healers think I am."

He heaved a sigh and reached out to touch her hand, but she managed with great difficulty to tug it away after the barest of contact. A flash of emotion morphed his features into a frown, and then he smoothed it out into nothing. Curling his hand into a fist, he dropped it to his side.

"Why are you here?" she croaked and then grimaced with the pain.

"You were kidnapped. That needs to be investigated. Do you really think I wouldn't? It's important for me to know if the Order was involved in any way. The fact Malfoy is refusing basic questioning is... suspicious."

Hermione decided she could give him *some* information.

"I don't think they were the Order."

"Why not?"

She shrugged, or attempted to. "The men—well, I have no real reason. I just don't think they were involved with the Order."

Titus considered her. He didn't give any affirmation, but she knew he took what she said into account.

"Did you figure out their motive?"

"Karkaroff wanted to sell me to some wealthy families in the East. He needed galleons. Said I'd go for a high price at an auction. I didn't figure out much more before Draco rescued me."

Titus hissed out a hard sound and recrossed his arms. He lowered his head down a bit, blue eyes darkening.

After, he took out his wand and twirled it once. He tapped it a few times against his thigh.

"It's a shame he expired. I would have liked to have *questioned* him myself. Did Malfoy kill all of them?"

"No one escaped." She hadn't been able to sort through her feelings on her experience yet, especially the fact she'd killed a man. So far, she didn't feel the guilt and shame that she thought she would. Her heart held nothing. And why should it? Did Titus ever regret the times he had to kill? Did Draco? If they didn't, then neither would she.

Perhaps that meant she was broken, or perhaps that meant she was strong, but it was worthless to label herself as either.

"You've become skilled at answering without telling the whole truth." Titus stared at her for a long time, tapping away at his thigh, and then he glanced up and ran a hand along his face. "You killed one of them, didn't you?"

"No."

"Tell me the truth."

"It is the truth."

"Fuck, Sprite." He shook his head. "Here's what I've been told— you were kidnapped in the Leaky. Malfoy had turned his back, and then you were gone. No witnesses. He had a trace on you and followed you to Knockturn Alley where you were being held captive. From there, Draco somehow managed to kill five capable wizards—one of them a former Durmstrang headmaster. Not exactly an easy feat. It sounds... fantastical, and I don't believe the story at all."

Titus waited in silence after he'd finished, and Hermione almost squirmed in discomfort. Neither of them did anything to alleviate the accusation thrown between them.

"What Draco said is all true."

"Do you want to know why I don't believe him, or will you go ahead and give me the correct information?"

"I've already given you the correct information."

He narrowed his eyes. "The records indicate you exited the floos alone from the manor. I checked them myself. Draco's signature didn't exit until much later."

Even under polyjuice, the floo signature would show up as her name, since all types of travel were monitored by the ministry. They couldn't logistically keep track of movement between households, but the Leaky was public access. There wasn't much to be done about that. It never mattered before, since no one would bother to check— unless they were being investigated.

Hermione tried not to freeze.

"Records are not infallible."

"That's a weak retort."

"Why are you interrogating me and not Draco?"

"It would be a political nightmare. Right now, I'm running off intuition for most of my accusations, many of them based on my knowledge of Malfoy's inability to handle your rebellious spirit the way he should."

Titus broke her stare and glared at the window, lips thinned from pressure.

"I'm not sure what you're implying—"

"You've always been a terrible liar," he cut her off. "Your tells are all over the place, and you don't even try to control them. From the moment I walked in here, you've evaded my questions. It leaves me in a quandary." He sighed deeply. "As always when it comes to you, I know what I *should* do, but it's not what I want to do."

"What should you do?" Hermione tried to act brave, but there was a note of hesitancy in her voice.

"I should dig into your mind." He pocketed his wand. "But given that you somehow learned to cast both a patronus and a crucio without my knowledge, I have a feeling you know enough occlumency to put up a fight. I could crack whatever pathetic walls you'd conjure, but it might injure your brain in the process— more than it already is right now."

Hermione's heart sank at the suggestion, despite him not completing the task.

Titus leaned forward, grabbed her chin, tilting it toward him. Though everything about him was familiar, at the moment, he felt threatening.

"Your patronus came to the treehouse," he whispered, and she went still. "I hadn't been home, but Bitty saw it and retrieved the message. This whole time I've been hoping for the truth

from you, but I'm starting to think you're incapable of it."

Hermione couldn't stop her sharp intake of breath, and Titus stared at her mouth with the intensity of a Dementor.

She'd sent the patronus to Draco, but it was a complicated spell. Most wizards couldn't even manage to cast it *with* a wand, so without a wand, the intention to send it beyond her senses proved past her capabilities. In her moment of desperation, she must have thought of the treehouse, of learning to cast it with her coven. It made sense that she'd send it to her previous sanctuary.

It hadn't been sent to Titus. That she knew. But it had gone to a place she'd once felt safe.

Titus had entered this room already knowing she'd produced a complicated spell, suggesting she didn't have her shackles on when she'd been kidnapped.

Hermione sat frozen, afraid any movement would give up more clues.

"No matter what Malfoy says, he wasn't with you. Not only that, but you somehow managed to send a patronus without a wand, when your magic was supposed to be subdued. The conclusion it leads me to is very disturbing."

The conclusion he suggested was the truth—that under polyjuice and fake papers, she'd wandered Diagon Alley without her shackles and without any supervision.

By his stern expression, so near to her, he *knew*.

"Are you going to arrest me?"

"You tell me, Sprite— what the fuck should I do?" He squeezed his eyes shut as if trying to gain control. "You won't believe me, but I've attempted to come to terms with your choice. I've tried—but Malfoy needs to understand that I'll put up with a great many things, but I refuse to see you in danger. And this is the *last* time I will allow it."

"Allow it? I'm *Draco's*," she seethed. "He gets to decide what to do with me. He gets to take care of me now, not you."

Instead of arguing with her, his expression hardened. A beep sounded near them. A charm meant to show she needed the potion again.

"Here," Titus said. "Let me."

He grabbed the vial on the side of the bed, uncapped it, and placed it toward her lips. Her arms still felt impossible to move with her exhaustion.

"I can wait until Draco's back."

"Just take it."

She had little choice. With her arms still leaden next to her, she opened her lips as he tipped it up. The horrid taste made her wish to spit it back out, but she managed to swallow.

When done, he pulled back and wiped a small amount of potion from her lips.

"You and Theo are all I have left." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead, lingering a moment and taking a deep breath. With the potion bursting in her veins, she didn't have the strength to pull away. After, he grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her eye to eye. "The thought of what those men could have done to you— there are no words to describe my rage. Please, for the love of Merlin, stop putting yourself in situations where I need to be an auror to you. Because next time, I might have to—"

The door burst open, and Draco entered, cheeks blotchy pink and forehead sweaty like he'd run the whole way here. He paused in the doorway, staring at them for only a second until his wand popped into his hand from his shirt sleeve, pointing it at Titus' head. "Get the fuck away from her."

A ripple of tension went down Titus' jaw, but he released her neck, brushing her cheek as he stood. With mechanical movements, he turned, walking stiffly to the door. When he got to Draco, he glared, ignoring the wand pointed at his nose.

"Under your watch, I've had to see Hermione in a ministry cell and now at St. Mungo's." His voice was caustic. "In my eyes, the *only* thing you're good for is keeping her safe, and you're even fucking that up. Control her." He loomed closer to him. "Or I *will*."

Draco pocketed his wand, a cocky grin spreading on his face.

"Control her? Why would I need to do that when—" He broke off the taunt he'd planned to say, looking at Hermione, as if remembering something. "As you wish, Nott. I'll be sure you never need to see her again."

Titus took a threatening step forward, fists clenched.

"Rest well, Sprite," he said and then left the room without even looking back.

Draco remained in the doorway until the click of Titus' boots went further down the corridor.

"I only left because you ran out of potions."

Ran out? She still tasted the bitter notes on her tongue.

"But Titus—"

"I think he stole your final vial somehow, so that I'd go to the manor for more. Did he do anything... untoward?"

Of course, Titus had manipulated the situation. He'd meant to force his way into her sick room the whole time. Taking the potion. Pretending to be on duty.

"Not really, but he knows the truth."

"Not well enough to do anything about it. I thought I had miscounted the vials, but I shouldn't have fallen for his tricks."

In a better state, Draco might have seen through the ploy. But his exhaustion dripped from every movement. The way he shuffled inside, almost bent forward. Shadows darkened under his eyes, skin paler than normal. His hair in disarray.

He reached her bed, and instead of sitting in the chair, he crawled in beside her. After sending a locking spell toward the door and plucking a few orange cat hairs off his jumper, he pressed his face to her neck and sighed.

"I'm going to request that you stop your muggle charity for now. It is more dangerous than I anticipated. You don't have—"

"Okay."

He blinked at her, as if he'd been expecting to convince her. "That was way too easy."

She'd been considering it even before he'd asked. Hermione was starting to realise she didn't understand the outside world enough to make the correct moves to keep everyone safe. Susan's death remained on her hands, and the insidious guilt it left ate through her confidence that she was doing the right thing.

"Perhaps we could still find a way to funnel Amy some money. She was— she was doing so well and happy."

"If you wish." Draco took in a deep breath and closed his eyes. "That was your last dose. Tell me you remember everything."

"More than everything."

He hummed against her skin, arm cinched around her waist, dragging her closer.

"You took that curse for me. It should have been me in your place."

"I'd do it again."

"I wouldn't allow you to be such a Gryffindor."

"I— well, thank you for healing me." That was insufficient for the days of worry and endurance he'd managed.

"Granger," he whispered, and she felt his grin on her neck. "I don't think you understand me."

Hermione didn't ask for clarification.

Fresh from her nightmares, Draco resembled Lucius to a stomach-turning degree. The part of her that recoiled from Lucius wished to do the same with his son. And maybe she would have obeyed the impulse if he'd stayed the same spoiled little boy who'd attended her father's



execution. That night, Draco had tugged off his little mask, demanding to have her, as if she was just a pet to entertain him.

In many ways, Draco had gotten everything he'd wanted too. She should resent that. But when he finally passed out from exhaustion, mouth pressed to her neck, legs curled around her hips possessively, she did nothing except lean into the touch as much as possible and allow herself to rest in his embrace.

---

When she arrived back at the manor, she ate a giant meal and took a long bath, soaking until her fingers pruned. After, she combed her hair, styling it, and wrapped herself in a robe to head downstairs.

She found Draco in the library like he'd told her. He stood behind an old wooden table toward the back of the stacks, with a map laid out in front of him, pinned down with charms on the corners—the same map that had been in the decaying flat in Knockturn. The last time she'd seen it, blood had been splattered across the top. Draco must have cleaned and mended it.

The same lines encircled and shaded Europe and Asia.

Deep in thought, Draco had both his arms bracketed on the table, only glancing up at her arrival. Since she'd been injured, he'd stared at her the same—almost decadent in its appreciation. Roving up and down, savouring the sight of every curve and freckle and curl, as if he might never see it again.

"How did you get this?" Hermione walked forward, hesitant to touch it. Given what she'd gone through, the map felt haunted.

"On my first trip back to grab the potions, I returned to the flat and took their personal belongings. I knew it was only a matter of time before the aurors would investigate, so I needed to get there first." He placed a finger on the edge of France, following the zigzagging line. "This is something I don't understand, and I'd like your input."

"It has to do with the curse." Hermione slid into a chair across from him. She'd thought of it during her last day when she'd reviewed her memories. It was the only conclusion she could find. "Possibly it's all of the areas affected. I feel like Titus mentioned a boundary a time or two. He even said once that they monitor it, since unaffected countries have shut down any travel or diplomacy."

"My father told me something similar." Draco's finger trailed the red line again—bisecting Spain. "He said we've reinforced our borders with magical wards, making it so no one could cross. Either in or out. A necessary step to protect our people."

"Like wards for a manor? That would require a lot of magic." Hermione grabbed a wet curl and twisted it around her finger.

"It would." He traced up to Italy, hovering over the shaded parts. "In theory, if all of the old families and prestigious wizards from across the cursed countries were banned together, it would be possible. But I think we've both been lied to."

Hermione leaned closer, still avoiding touching the map.

"What do you mean?"

"Why does this divide Spain?" Draco pointing to the line. "Why doesn't it neatly line the coast? Why does it rest in the ocean around us, but it segues onto land in other places? It makes no sense."

Hermione blinked a few times, studying the map again. She'd thought it was strange the first time, but there had been too much going on to really think deep on it.

"You don't think it's strange that other countries haven't attempted to enter— or have ever succeeded to—even for trade?" Draco continued. "From what I've studied, before the curse, there was significant travel between us, even at the height of the dark wizarding and muggle wars. So why is it so closed off now?"

"What do you suspect?" Hermione whispered.

"I have some suspicions, and I've heard some rumours, but I want to see it for sure. I have a contact that I've reached out to that is willing to let us go here— for an enormous sum, of course." He pointed to Russia, near the red line that cut it in half. "My informant tells me it's the best place to go, because of the remote location. Many of the wizards and muggles have fled the old cities there, making it easier to move without detection."

Something bugged her until it made her stomach twist. Her brain snagged on something that caused a chill to zip across her skin.

"I understand why Titus would prevent me from knowing any of this. He never planned to let me know anything." She extended her arm over the map. "But why hasn't your father told you?"

"That's the part that makes me hesitate." Draco left the map and walked over, grabbing her chin, tilting her face up to his. "I have a feeling that once we understand this map that we'll wish we didn't know."

Again, he gave her the choice. She could know the truth or hide her head in the sand and pretend nothing else existed.

"I need to know."

Draco hesitated, but he nodded.

"Then let's go," he said. "I've been told that travel will be difficult. I've authorised special papers for the visit and bribed several people to let us pass through the checkpoints without detection, but it's still a risk. Once we make it out of the United Kingdom, it should be easier."

Despite the heavy reasons for travel, Hermione was excited at the idea of exiting the country. She'd never been anywhere besides the manors, the muggle world, and few places in wizarding Britain.

"When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow."

---

The journey happened much like he said. Instead of going into muggle London, they hopped through a floo again. From there, they met several checkpoints. It shocked Hermione how hard it was to travel. Draco explained his job let him into several cities, but not everywhere. She'd always thought the restrictions pertained to just people lower in the hierarchy, but they interrogated Malfoy too, searching over his papers until satisfied, and then they only let him through because he paid them. If someone like Malfoy, who had both a powerful last name and money, struggled to get around freely, then what chance did anyone else have?

She suspected, though, that Lucius got around with much more ease. And Titus had all the access in the world, so they must be well aware of what the map meant.

After getting out of wizarding Britain and into France, the travel became much easier, going through several connected floos until they landed in Russia. She didn't get much time to see the people or buildings before they transferred to the countryside. It amazed her how far a person could travel in an instant.

The last floo spit them out in a rundown building. It must have been pretty once—or at least, cleaner. The building was large and empty. Old rows of seats, a few ghost shops. Large windows took up one side, and giant contraptions rotted outside on the concrete. Hermione walked close to the window, looking out to a graveyard of muggle technology.

"What is this place?"

Draco walked forward, standing beside her. "This is where the aeroplanes took off into the sky and landed."

Hermione glanced around in fascination, recognizing the airport now from the movies. It produced an eerie feeling, as if looking through a time portal. A place like this should be bustling with people. The emptiness made something crawl down her spine.

The energy left over made her want to return home, heavy with loss in a way Hermione couldn't define, though she'd had little concept of a place like this beyond the movies they watched. Maybe it was the knowledge that this could have been her life had things not gone wrong. Would she have sat in seats similar to this, holding Hopper, next to her mother and father while they freely travelled the world?

What would it have been like to see the world and all of the places she'd read about?

The grief this time resembled claustrophobia, and she wished to move.

Luckily, their guide exited the floo not long after they arrived. He was a small man, shorter than average, and when he grinned, his teeth were stained dark. From what she'd seen, dental care must be in short supply outside pureblood circles.

"The Malfoy heir," he rasped with a hint of an accent. English obviously wasn't his first language, but he spoke it beautifully. "Welcome to the *beautiful* Krasnoyarsk."

"Lovely," Draco said, glancing at the crumbling interior. The sarcasm was easy to detect. Hermione suspected the old city it was situated beside was in a similar level of disrepair.

"Let's not linger. We only have a few hours before the floos close for the day, and then you'll be stuck here." The man reached in his pocket and pulled out a broom, enlarging it and handing it to Draco. "We'll have to fly, because this is where the network ends. Not many people even venture this far."

"Fly?" Hermione asked in alarm. Suddenly the trip didn't seem like such a great idea.

"Yes, pet, *fly*."

---

They dangled above the ground, the icy air lashing them, despite warming charms and impenetrable cloaks. But Hermione didn't care about the cold. She cared that her feet remained off the ground, floating at cloud level.

She clung to Draco's back like a baby monkey, feeling miserable and ill, wishing her curiosity hadn't been quite so strong.

Why did she care about the supposed border again? It was hard to remember through her terror. Despite Draco flying steadier and slower than normal, she knew he secretly enjoyed being in the air. If he hadn't been a potions master, she suspected he might have wanted to play professional quidditch.

Hermione groaned in relief when they finally began to descend. But as she did, all the hair on her neck stood up. There was a strange energy in the air. Like magic, but soured, rotten. If it had a smell, it would reek of sulphur.

They broke through the grey clouds and descended to the ground. The destination was moderately hilly where they planned to land, with white capped mountains in the distance. The only thing that stood out on the landscape was a line of low fog— dark wispy clouds, stretching in a snaking line for as far as she could see, sitting on top of vibrant green.

"What is that?" She asked, ears popping with the descent.

"I have a feeling it's what I fear." Draco didn't offer any other explanation.

The wall of greenish-grey didn't appear solid in a corporeal sense. She suspected she could reach out and wrap the wispy threads around her arm if she wished, though it looked as if it would be suffocating to walk through, reminding her of smoke, but more volatile.

They landed softly, and Draco made sure she had her footing before taking away their broom.

Their guide looked back at them. He hadn't given them a name yet, and she didn't think he would, wishing for anonymity.

"What's that?" Draco pointed toward the seething mass of fog.

"That," the guide answered, "is our death."

"Death?" Hermione asked, almost in a trance. Her whole body trembled at the word and the power displayed before her. The energy whipped her robes, hair lifting in the air, like stepping close to electricity. A faint buzz could be felt and heard. "What do you mean by that?"

"That's what you're staring at."

It wasn't fog at all, she realised. Magic— visible magic. Like an eternal spell. Except it wasn't reacting with a wand core. This had been dredged from the depths of Earth. Like mother nature, it didn't seem to be caring or nurturing, good or bad. It felt brutal and wild. Violent chaos and capricious destruction.

A realisation crashed over her— it wasn't a border made by wizards; it was a border made by the curse itself.

Draco glanced at her, and she'd never seen him so disturbed. The shock of whatever was in front of them stripped him of his occlumency shield, exposing his vulnerable disquiet.

"Can anyone get through it— or over it?" Draco asked.

"Not that we know of. When it first happened, muggle planes slammed into the boundary and dropped out of the sky. Part of that might be the interference with technology. It fried most of the muggles' hardware. Though some of it survived, of course. Over the years, different people have attempted to tunnel under, but— that hasn't worked either."

"So we're stuck inside it?" Draco once again stared at the seething mass of green-grey darkness.

"Even the largest wall has cracks. There's never been a mountain or a gate that humans haven't scaled— except this one."

"If it's made of magic, it must have a loophole," Hermione said.

The guide nodded. He ran his tongue along his teeth. "Tell that to the people who have been trying to get in or out for over a decade."

"In?" Hermione caught the word. "So the rest of the world is still out there?"

"At first, we didn't know," he admitted. "Until the technology became usable again, we assumed most of them to be dead. Not sure who made the first contact or how. From what little I know, the whole world fell into chaos after the curse. But things have stabilised. Now the outside world is doing much better than us, and people have been attempting to find their way inside. None of their methods have worked, as you see."

"There's no way they could keep this a secret from the general populace," Hermione said.

"They kept it from a cherub like you, didn't they?" He stared at her in a greedy way that made her uncomfortable, and she shifted closer to Draco. "There have always been leaked rumours of course, and most know of a boundary or border, but the authorities have created enough distrust and misinformation to keep the real information hidden. It helps that muggles are naturally repelled about a mile from the border. It causes them to forget and turn around, similar to other magical charms. Still, the muggle chaos after the curse— cut off from the support of technology— bled into the wizarding world, and then the purebloods ran out of food too. People were too hungry to care about truth or lies."

"Lack of food— that's the true reason why we decided to subdue the muggles," Draco surmised.

"I'm pretty sure your daddy was the architect of that plan." He gave a nod to Draco. "The other countries soon followed the example to varying degrees."

"But how did they manage that?" Hermione asked. "There were... so many of them."

"Muggles outnumber us normally, but the chaos at the beginning of the curse resulted in a slaughter. It's estimated that eighty percent of the population or more died within the first six months, mostly from starvation and lack of medical care, but also violence."

Hermione did remember her parents worrying about food. Remembered nights where they had nothing and the rows that followed. It was why she'd been so amazed at the food in Nott manor, served from heaping platters by crawling servingware.

"But it stabilised eventually?"

"Eventually, yes, when the purebloods gained strict control. They set up work camps, forcing the muggles to plant and grow food, along with producing other essential commodities. They created a ration system to feed everyone, but it's still not enough. The population's still starving."

"But how have they kept the border from the wizarding population?"

"Many wizards do know to an extent, but the wizards in charge try to keep the worst of it secret, especially from the younger generations. Only a few are granted access. They've implemented checkpoints and identity papers, and there are charms set up along the coast. It helps that much of the boundary for you is set in the ocean. And anyone found breaking the new statute of secrecy is obliviated. Sometimes killed."

It seemed excessive, and she knew there was more she was missing.

Hermione remembered her excursion into muggle London, the hassle to even step outside of Diagon Alley. And then the struggle to get out of the country, even with the Malfoy name.

"My father—" Draco started, then stopped, shaking his head. "What about other countries? Are they just as strict? I've been to France, but mostly stayed in our chateau."

"The UK is the worst. France and Germany might be next. Several of the Eastern European countries are less strict, since their borders don't scrape against the grey mist."

Bulgaria—Hermione was reminded of her conversations with Viktor. From what he suggested, the muggleborns were treated better there.

"So we could be trapped like this forever?" Hermione's voice trembled, suddenly understanding the enormity of what was before her.

The guide gave her an odd expression. Maybe one of fear. Maybe more disturbed. It set Hermione on edge.

"It might be more comforting if the answer *was* forever." The man glared at the border, voice lowering. "Since the beginning, the mist likes to shift spontaneously, mostly inward."

"What happens when it shifts?" Draco had put back up his occlumency shield, face hard, as if he also knew he'd need inner calm, and Hermione stiffened beside him, bracing herself.

"Last year, officials in China noticed the mist moving more than usual. It was odd enough that they considered evacuation. Before they could warn people, it snapped like a rubber band, swallowing half of the country in one go."

The shaded region on the map.

"What happened to the people and animals in the way?" Hermione's fingers felt numb with cold, and she pressed them together to retain feeling.

"No one knew at first, just that all contact had been lost. But slowly the reports came in." His eyes left the mist and went to Draco. "*Miles* of bodies and corpses—no one survived. Millions of people, gone in a second. Since then, the boundary has been even more unstable. A smaller snap happened in Greece and Italy. No one knows where to hide. Countries inland, like Ukraine, have already shut down their borders as best they can to keep out refugees, but no one knows when or where it will happen next. All we know is that when it does snap, we'll all end up like this."

He reached in his pocket and took out a rat with a rope tied around its waist. It didn't squirm, so it seemed sedated, probably magically. Hermione opened her mouth to ask a question, but the guide threw the small mammal into the mist. It didn't even make a sound as it was swallowed. Hermione gasped, unable to stop or process what she'd just seen.

A moment later, he tugged until a desiccated carcass appeared. Only the shrivelled husk of a rat remained.

She and Draco stepped back at the same time, as if death was catching.

"You just killed it!" Hermione stepped forward in anger, but Draco tugged on her shoulder, reminding her that it wasn't the place or time.

"It was just a rat," the guide said, finding amusement in her outrage.

"So we're not just trapped." Draco's hand went out to hers, wrapping their fingers together. "We're trapped in a deadly cage that's closing in."

"They can't keep this secret," Hermione said. A panic attack brimmed just below the surface of her mind. "If this is a result of the curse, you would think everyone could work together to —"

The guide's loud, grating laugh cut her off.

"So precious. You must—"

"The secrecy is to control panic." Draco stared at the desiccated rat. "Knowing death is imminent and out of their control would destabilise everything. If they didn't manage the information, the chaos would have continued. There would probably be a mass exodus out of the UK, because we are close to the border, and it would overwhelm other countries. My father—he didn't want me to know, because there doesn't seem to be anything that can save us."

No way in. No way out.

After a moment of reflection, she understood.

Lucius had been protecting Draco's psyche from a nihilistic hopelessness, wanting him to live as normal a life as possible, while still preparing him for survival. After her ritual, the elder Malfoy had held the Venus statue, begging gods he didn't believe in to have mercy on them. It hadn't been for himself. She understood this now. It had been for Draco. Lucius wanted a world where his son had a future, and it seemed he'd do anything to obtain that.

Everything clicked together. All of the small interactions throughout her life bore a heavier weight than before.

She still hadn't forgiven Titus, but she understood his desperation to end the curse—for Theo and for her. He'd sacrificed her that night, thinking it would free everyone, and after it failed, he was devastated, knowing that her suffering—and his betrayal—had been for nothing.

Dolohov's motive became clear too. It wasn't about babies. Not for him. It was self-motivated survival, explaining his sickening disappointment displayed after her ritual had failed—one he'd put so much expectation into.

According to the basic laws, magic functioned on opposites. On and off. In and out. Stop and go. Every ward had a hole. Every curse had a countercurse. It made sense that an ancient Venus statue drenched in ancient creation magic, misused and out of control, had dredged up extinction as a cage.

The outside world wasn't callous, just irrelevant. While the curse did seem to cause infertility like Dumbledore intended, it also messed with ancient, deeper consequences—magic that should have never been tampered with.



The caste system of slavery the purebloods created provided a way to keep their peers fed, comfortable, and sated, serving them pleasure and hedonism with parties and excess. It gifted the purebloods a world where they got everything they wanted, uncontested. A false hope. An illusion for a mythical future where heirs still mattered. A future where a guillotine didn't hover over their necks, seconds away from snapping.

They used the barren hope as a tool for power, knowing people would endure any situation, as long as a sliver of hope remained that they could break free.

"I had planned to get us out." Draco's hand strangled her own as they kept their eyes on their future fate. Her heart hurt at the thought of escaping.

The daydream died inside her. They were in a giant fishbowl, unable to escape, with a border that killed on a whim. Trapped with sharks shaped like men who would eat them whole, if it meant staying alive and on top of the growing pile of corpses.

Hermione understood a bleak truth— if they didn't succeed in breaking the curse, then they would all soon be devoured.

## Chapter End Notes

Song Suggestion: Klergy- "The End"

"The truth is often avoided because it is ugly and unpleasant. Never appeal to truth and reality unless you are prepared for the anger that comes from disenchantment." Robert Greene, "The 48 Laws of Power"

Fun Fact: I based the survival rate of muggles on real information for EMPs. I actually lowered the number. If a powerful solar flare (or man made EMP) hit just right, the government estimates 90% of the population would die within a year, most within the first six months. Our systems are too fragile and intricate, and the countryside would be hunted to near extinction very quickly.

# Chapter 37: A Flame in the Dark

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Dove Cameron, Khalid– "We Go Down Together"

As always, a big thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for editing this chapter.

Trigger Warning at the bottom:

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

## A Flame in the Dark

Hermione found it hard to concentrate. She went to work at the apothecary and stood behind the till, feeling like a statue. When the customers came inside, she forced a smile, but as soon as they left, it slid off her face.

A nihilistic hopelessness— that was what Lucius had tried to protect Draco from. After seeing the mist, she promised herself she wouldn't sink into despair. Throughout her life, Hermione had always been steadfast in finding joy again. But the new revelation of impending doom cracked her endurance. Her joy became muted. Her hope doused.

A person's life was meant to be a domino, interacting against other people, causing a chain reaction. Whether good or bad, it was supposed to leave a lasting impression that continued after their death. The struggle for existence meant *something*.

But if complete obliteration was unavoidable, what was the point of trying to do anything meaningful? Everything could be wiped out in a snap. Maybe that's how life always had been and always would be— she'd just never noticed it. Now Hermione faced the existential nightmare in front of her, and it paralyzed her.

As a mirror to her apathy, Draco gained a new vigour for study, poring over the oldest texts in the library. When he wasn't working, he sat in the darkest, deepest corner, scribbling on his parchments like a madman until his candles guttered out.

"We can solve this," he told her one day. "Don't give up."

Without realising it, she fell into a deep depression, taking refuge into the secret parts of herself.

And as she traversed the corridors silently, she once again felt like a ghost.

---

A week later, Katie surprised her with a visit without Flint. When she arrived through the floo, sweat beaded on her forehead, her face appeared ashen, as if exhausted. Hermione assumed this pregnancy produced morning sickness like the last one

Having no idea of the remedy for that type of nausea, Hermione almost offered some water or a cracker when Dean and Pansy suddenly stepped out of the floo.

Pansy wore a sly grin, as if containing a secret.

"Dean!" Katie exclaimed.

The timing of their entrance felt suspicious. She suspected it was an attempt by Draco to lift her mood— a surprise gathering of her friends.

Pansy looked her up and down, wrinkling her upturned nose. "Navy blue looks better on you than yellow, but as I stated in my *explicit* instructions, sapphire is the preferred hue. And the fit still needs work. I'll send a warning to your tailor to always take your measurements thrice before ordering."

Hermione found herself warming to Pansy's blunt behaviour

"You really don't have—"

"I *insist*," Pansy said in a voice that left no argument. "Have fun, Dean dear. I probably won't be back to retrieve you for quite a while." She kissed Dean on the cheek. "Oh, and you owe me a favour after today."

"Whatever for?"

"You'll see."

After that cryptic statement, she disappeared with an elegant flutter of a cape.

"Pansy certainly knows how to make an entrance," Katie said.

"By your tone, I'm assuming that's an insult," Dean said, raising an eyebrow.

"Not sure."

"She'd be flattered if it was." Dean grinned. "It's good to see you both. I've missed you so fucking much."

After giving both Katie and Hermione a hug, Dean draped himself along one of the silk couches, one arm flung over the back. But before they could start a conversation, another pop of the floo interrupted them.

All of them froze in shock.

Finch hovered in front of the floo, as gangly and tall as she remembered. After catching his step from the awkward entrance, he fidgeted with the buttons on his shirt.

"Hello," he said in a soft voice.

Hermione almost gasped at the sound, having not heard his voice in almost a year.

"Finch?" Dean's voice cracked. His arm slid off the couch, mouth open, eyes wide. "What are you doing here?"

Katie made a strangled sound, placing a hand over her lips.

"I— Malfoy convinced my masters to let me out of the house. Pansy is distracting Daphne with a shopping trip. Are you not happy to see me?"

Dean shook his head, as if to dislodge something. He seemed in a trance as he slowly stood and walked toward the man he loved.

"Not happy to see you?" When Dean got close to Finch, he placed a hand gently on his gaunt cheek. "I—I've— there hasn't been a moment I haven't thought of you." Finch rested a hand over Dean's, cradling both to his cheek. "I can't believe you're real."

Finch's eyes watered, bottom lip quivering, and the energy in the room shifted. Katie glanced at Hermione, sensing the same thing.

"We'll be in the gardens," Hermione stated in a loud voice, but the boys didn't seem to hear her, lost in each other. "When you're um— *ready*— you can come find us. Careful though, the portraits are terrible gossips."

Taking the hint, Hermione and Katie walked out, giving each other private grins. Katie wiggled her eyebrows, and Hermione did her best to smother her laughter.

It wasn't until they made it to the gardens that Hermione realised she'd smiled for real for the first time since the mist.

---

Hours later, they sat outside in the middle of the largest garden.

"With all of his money, maybe Malfoy could build us a treehouse." Dean leaned back on the grass. "For old time's sake."

An albino peacock fluttered around him, spreading his plumage. Griffin—the stupidest one— had taken a liking to Dean, following him around, much to the man's amusement. Despite displaying an impressive array of feathers, the beast smelt like shite.

"I can't blame him for his attraction. I am rather fetching." Dean placed his head in Finch's lap, staring at the clouds. Finch rolled his eyes, but played with his hair.

These were their stolen moments, and she didn't interrupt them.

Hermione held Crooks close to her chest. The peacocks and her cat had a fragile truce while in her presence. Still, each time a bird wandered too close, Crooks gave a sharp hiss of warning.

With the comfortable silence, Hermione considered telling her friends the truth about what she'd learned, but she found it impossible.

*There's no future for any of us. Everyone will be snapped from existence, and there's nowhere to run to escape it.*

Dean and Finch seemed so happy to be near each other, and Hermione couldn't bear infecting them with the bitter reality.

But another part of her felt guilty by withholding information. So much so that her mouth opened, ready to spill the secrets that weighed on her, but Finch interrupted her attempt.

"Daphne's pregnant," Finch announced, as if he'd recited the weather for the day.

After a few confused seconds, Dean shot up from his lap.

"Pregnant?"

"I— well, we managed to try the suggestions that Pansy told her—" Finch cut himself off with a deep red blush.

Dean just continued to blink at him.

*Congratulations* almost rolled off her tongue on instinct, but she bit it back instead, because he didn't seem happy about it— and why would he?

"So that's why they were okay with you coming over here?" Dean surmised.

"Mr. Greengrass told me it was my reward. I'm not sure he'll let me again. It doesn't matter, I suppose. After the birth, I don't think they'll keep me. He doesn't like how I'm not athletic and thinks I'll pass that onto his heirs."

"Leaving that place would be a good thing, right?" Dean asked with a frown. A fire lit behind his eyes every time Finch mentioned something about his treatment. "I thought you hated all of them?"

"I do. And I *should* be happy. But— I keep thinking about it. Will the baby have my hair? Or my eyes?" Finch's eyes seemed far away, as if he resided in the clouds above. "I thought I wanted nothing more than to leave, but if I leave, would I ever see my child again?"

The men were traded faster than the women. To the purebloods, they had little use. After their purpose was fulfilled, the masters sold them to whoever would take them, unless they wanted a second. The purebloods didn't like the idea of a muggleborn hanging around and defiling their daughters.

Finch's statement left a painful twist in her stomach, wishing she could wipe his worry away.

But the revelation had multiple layers of problems. Dean hadn't been able to father a child still, even though he and Pansy had been trying for nearly a year. Soon there would be invasive testing, of which she knew little, though it sounded ominous.

That Finch managed to impregnate Daphne would only be another reason to raise eyebrows.

"I need to use the loo," Katie said abruptly, standing up. Her face seemed even paler than before.

"The closest one is near the sitting room. Call for Mipsy. She'll show you."

Hermione watched her friend walk away, as the three of them lay close, side by side, staring at the wandering clouds in silence.

"I wish I had more ways to help you, but all I can give you is my love," she whispered to Finch. "No matter what, they can't take that from you. It's yours forever."

"I know," Finch said with a sigh, reaching out to grab her hand.

---

Katie had been absent for an hour before she began to worry.

Hermione left the boys to give them some more private time and went everywhere she might have gone. Giving up, Hermione employed Mipsy's help. Soon after, the elf popped back into view.

"Mistress Flint is in the library."

Katie never liked libraries much, so Hermione wondered why she'd be in there. An odd sinking sensation started in her stomach as she hurried along, sensing something wrong. Entering the familiar room, she travelled to the back, passing rows of old tomes. Rounding a corner, she froze at the sight that met her.

Katie had curled up on the ground under a stained-glass window, knees to her chest with both hands pressed on her face, turned away so all Hermione could see was her back. Deep sobs escaped with each heave of her trembling shoulders.

"Katie— what's wrong?"

"It's happening again. It started yesterday, but it's getting worse. I was hoping if I ignored it, then it would stop."

"What's happening?"

Katie only shook her head and stood. Before she could straighten, she cried out in pain, bent over, grabbing her lower stomach where a bump had yet to show. A small splotch of dark red stained the white fabric of her dress.

"Fuck... Mipsy!" Hermione yelled, and the elf popped into view, ears shivering with anxiety. "Go get a healer from St. Mungo's."

"No!" Katie cried. But the elf disappeared, following the bidding of her mistress.

"Here, lie down, and I'll get one of the kitchen elves to fetch you water."

Katie shook her head, face puffy, eyes bloodshot, skin sweaty and grey. Hermione didn't know if she'd ever seen her friend like this.

"I can't go to St. Mungo's. He'll find out. Please, Hermione, let's keep this a secret."

"Flint?" Hermione asked in confusion. "Of course, he'll find out. If not today, then eventually. Come on, let's sit down."

"He can't know. He *can't*." Katie cried in pain again, clutching her stomach. "This is the second time this has happened. If I can't carry his child to term— what will I do?"

"We'll figure that out later. This is a medical emergency! I can't just let you bleed out."

"I won't bleed out. If I wait, it'll pass like it did last time." But even she seemed to doubt that. As another wave of agony caused Katie to cry and stumble, the red splotch on her white dress grew. Hermione was left without any choice but to get a healer.

Despite her protests, Hermione walked forward and helped her lay back down. Katie seemed to be in so much shock, she let her.

"I don't want to be given to anyone else." Her friend, normally so strong, shivered in fear.

"He won't give you up for something that's out of your control. This isn't your fault." But Hermione bit her tongue, unsure if that was true. She didn't know anything about Flint. Maybe he would throw her to the side. From what she'd seen of him, Hermione didn't like him much.

And then who would she go to? And if no one claimed her, because she struggled to stay pregnant, what then?

Despite trying to soothe her, she acknowledged Katie's fears were real.

"I wanted this one." Katie fingers stroked her stomach, right above the stain of red. "I had dreams that it was a girl. She had dark hair and her father's green eyes. Marcus had already—" her voice choked. "He'd already commissioned work on the nursery, designing it himself. Said he wanted to surprise me"

Hermione didn't know what to do or say. She just held her friend, rocking her for comfort, and waited for the healer to arrive.

---

Draco arrived back at the manor right along with the healer. Mipsy had retrieved him from wherever he'd been. After, he set the house elves to work, letting Katie use an empty guest room to be seen by the healer there after she refused to go to St. Mungo's.

Draco stood outside the room, waiting for Marcus to arrive, while Hermione stayed with Katie as the healer looked her over, holding her hand. Dean and Finch remained in the front sitting room, allowing them to be together until Pansy and Daphne retrieved them.

"I've done what I can," the healer said after a couple diagnostic charms. "I've given you a few potions to stabilise you, but by law, since it will affect your future fertility, we'll need to speak with your master before making any other medical decisions."

Katie nodded her head in acceptance, already knowing that would be the answer. When the healer left, she twisted on her side, staring at the opposite wall.

"Don't leave me alone," she whispered. "Even when he gets here. I— I don't know if I can face him."

"I won't."

---

Flint arrived thirty minutes later, his cheeks blotchy, as if he'd run.

"I'm sorry I got here late. No one told—" He paused while he walked in the room. His full attention was only on her friend, who didn't turn around to see him. The colour visibly leached from his face.

"It's gone." Katie spoke to the opposite wall.

Flint tensed.

"The healer informed me."

"I'm sorry I failed you."

"Failed?" Flint's heavy features wrinkled in confusion.

A heavy silence ensued.

"The healer said it will be hard for me to conceive or carry to term. I'd— I'd understand if you wanted to find a more reliable breeder."

Flint flinched as if she'd smacked him, mouth tugged down in a harsh frown. He took one step forward and hesitated. He seemed unsure what to do before he began walking again.

After reaching the bed, he leaned over and gathered Katie in his arms. He sat with his back to the headboard and his legs straight, pulling her gently into his lap, positioning her so she faced him.

"You think I would just get rid of you?" His voice sounded harsh. Katie looked to the side, but he didn't allow her to hide. Placing the edge of his finger under her chin, he tugged her face up to his and wiped the tears from under her eyes.

"I don't know what to think."

"Why would you think I'd want another?"

"Isn't that my purpose?"



Marcus showed his ugly, jagged teeth with a grimace. His mouth moved without sound, as if formulating a response.

"Who won the last quidditch world cup?"

"The Karasjok Kites," she answered. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

Marcus shook his head. "Who is my favourite player?"

"Marsedan." She wrinkled her nose. "And I still don't know why. I've already explained to you that his stats are the second worst in the league. And he constantly overswings, causing him to miss the bludger almost half the time. It's a powerful swing, I'll give him that, but his aim is shite."

Marcus' grimace turned into a grin. He wasn't an attractive man, with heavy features and bad teeth, but with the way he looked at Katie, eyes bright green, searching her face, Hermione could see how he might be handsome under the right conditions.

"Do you see now?" He asked.

"No, I don't."

"I can live without heirs." He held her cheeks in a gentle, firm hold, pulling her face closer to his. "But who else besides you would tell me that I'm fucking stupid for rooting for the Falcons and Marsedan? Who else could almost beat me at flying?"

"You only beat me at flying because you cheated."

Even in emotional turmoil, Katie couldn't resist her competitive spirit.

"Possibly."

All the tense lines in her body deflated, and she looked back at Marcus as if lost.

"The baby—" she said.

"The baby was ours. That's why I'm upset. Nothing more." He kissed her forehead, and she trembled on contact. His hand tangled in her hair, shoving the damp strands out of her face. "Let me deal with the ministry."

Despite wanting to honour her friend's request to stay, Hermione felt like she was intruding. When Katie laid her head on his shoulder and began to sob, she understood they needed privacy. As Hermione stood, she caught Flint's eye. He gave a nod, as if to say thank you.

Staring at the two of them, Hermione realised Katie's reluctance to liking Flint didn't have as much to do with her finding him unattractive, or in personality compatibility, but the fear of forming any sort of attachment at all. Placing her trust in a man that could hurt her was a dangerous endeavour.

It resonated with Hermione, because a large part of her felt the same. The power structure left little room for trust and love.

Knowing her friend was safe, even if only for now, Hermione slipped out of the room, sifting through her complicated thoughts and emotions.

Draco stood outside, still waiting for her. He stared at Katie's door with disquiet as it clicked shut again. Hermione placed a hand on his arm to get his attention, but he continued to stare at the door, expression bleak.

"I was there," he whispered after a moment, voice flat.

"There?"

"When Deanna died."

"Oh—" Hermione was unsure how to respond. "Did you—"

"My father wanted the baby born on the grounds as is the tradition for all Malfoys. Deanna wanted to be at St. Mungo's, but he ignored her fears, confident he'd hired the best healers."

Hermione held her breath with the pause, afraid moving would cause him to close off again.

"What happened?"

He swallowed hard, and he briefly closed his eyes. "Something went wrong. Her screams—I couldn't bear it, just waiting. I'd never heard anything like it. I managed to force my way inside the room to help her, convinced she was being tortured, but it was too late. For both of them. The baby was—" he cut himself off mid-sentence. His face smoothed, occlumency shields snapping into place. "Death during pregnancy is rare in the wizarding world. I'm told the rate is much higher among muggles, but there are some things magic can't fix."

"Draco—" Hermione said, but he shoved off her arm. As if coming to his senses, he turned to her. A palpable rage rolled off him.

"What we're doing—it's a type of violence that's unforgiveable. Perhaps Dumbledore was right in attempting to eradicate us."

"You're not—"

"I don't know how to save you from this, and the thought of forcing you into it—I'm not fucking doing it."

He ignored any other attempts at getting him to talk and walked away. As Hermione made her way to the front sitting room to say goodbye to Dean and Finch, she wondered at the fear and love and pain required to bring another human into the world.

And the grief when it went wrong.

---

A few days later, Hermione stood behind the till at the apothecary. It had become a distraction for her. In her down time, she organised the potions, finding her system worked much better than what Draco had created.

During the process of putting the Runespoor Eggs on the shelf behind the counter, the bell jingled, signalling the entrance of a customer. Hermione straightened, prepared to smile, but stopped.

Titus filled the doorway, wearing his full auror body armour.

Hermione remained frozen, watching as he walked inside and around the shop, boots clipping hard against the wooden floor. He studied the shelves in pensive silence. Since her stay at St. Mungo's, he'd groomed his beard into a short, attractive style. He seemed better rested, as if finding a new purpose. Instead of setting her at ease, it caused the hair on the back of her neck to rise in alarm.

She wore her disguise. Sofia Romano— a random pureblood or halfblood, escaping Italy on a work visa. But Titus had a quick mind and held multiple puzzle pieces already. His presence signalled his suspicions.

"You have a good selection of ingredients," he said, eyes still on the shelves, though she didn't doubt he'd already taken in the details of the rest of the room. "Possibly better than Mulpepper's."

This was a common trick of his. A friendly conversation to gain his suspect's trust, to lower their guard. Hermione wasn't fooled. This was an investigation disguised as a simple shopping excursion.

"Since Slug and Jiggers went out of business, Mulpepper was due for some competition," Hermione answered, attempting to steady her voice. "Their price for gillyweed is nearly criminal. Perhaps you should pay them a visit after and threaten them with a charge of price gouging."

Titus barked out a laugh, and then he shook his head, as if he hadn't meant to do that. He picked up a bottle of Baneberry and turned and walked toward the till, setting it down with a click on the counter.

Hermione attempted to control the tremble in her fingers as she rang him up— but she failed. When she reached for his handful of sickles, he grabbed her wrist.

"You're still not wearing the bracelet I made you."

He knew.

She should have known he'd see past her disguise

With a sudden spike of fear, she tried to tug her hand away, but he tightened his grip.

"Titus— please—" she hated begging him for things more than anything.

"Is this how they kidnapped you— working here alone?" He glanced around the shop, and then for the first time since entering, he met her eyes. "Or was it something else?"

"Is this an official interrogation? Because, if not, I'm not required to tell you anything."

Despite his armour, it wasn't an official interrogation, or he'd be required to bring her into the ministry.

Her wrist began to throb under his calloused fingers.

"It's reckless of Draco to let you come here alone—"

"I'm not alone. His elf follows me. Don't take this from me."

The thought of giving up her job so soon after she started made rage writhe inside her.

He stared at her wrist, thumb brushing over the veins.

"You didn't let me finish," he said in a softer voice. "I'll admit it was clever of him to give you something to do. It has the potential to keep you busy and out of trouble, so I don't want to take this from you. I just want you to be safe."

He said the word "busy" as if she was Crookshanks, clawing at the furniture when bored. She glared at him, still holding her wrist in his hand. What she hated most was that he was right. It did give her something to do. Though keeping her out of trouble proved variable.

"I'm not sure what your point is."

"Work for me instead. I need a secretary. Someone to help me fill out reports."

"I'd rather eat bubotuber pus."

Titus took in a slow, deep breath, as if to measure his response to her antagonistic answer.

"If your hesitancy is about proximity to me, then you can be reassured that you'd rarely see me. I'd give you your own office. Even your own floor, if you wished. You'd never have to interact with anyone."

He paused, waiting for her answer.

Perhaps if he'd offered it to her several years ago, she'd have leapt at the opportunity. She might have even given him the appreciation he sought for the offer. Truthfully, working as a secretary to a Mediator would probably be more intellectually stimulating than an apothecary shopkeeper, but Draco had *given* this to her. Without strings or expectations. Simply because she'd asked.

"I'm happy here." She tugged her wrist out of his hold. This time he let her free.

His mouth hardened in bitter lines, and he leaned over the counter, close to her. "If you want to stay here, then I insist you wear the bracelet I made you, or I'll deem this— *adventure*—

too unsafe to continue."

Titus dropped the sickles in a pile on the counter and left the shop without looking back.

---

When she arrived back at the manor, Draco waited for her, standing near the fireplace, holding the leather bracelet in his hand.

Like she suspected, Mipsy had already informed him of Titus' visit and everything that was said. His occlumency shields were up, showing the interaction had bothered him.

Despite her doing nothing wrong, she felt the need to explain.

"Titus knows about my disguise. He offered me a position in the ministry, but I denied his request."

Draco studied the bracelet in his hand, and a sharp sneer peeked through. "You should have thrown this in the rubbish bin long ago."

Perhaps she should have.

"It's a good thing I didn't, because it's my only way to continue working."

"I don't want you wearing *anything* of his."

Her stomach clenched. She didn't either, but her desires were irrelevant. Titus was a mediator. He had the power to take everything from her

That he hadn't yet was suspicious. Either he didn't have enough evidence, biding his time, or he wanted something else. It made her wary to wear the bracelet— knowing it came with strings.

"Are you going to force me not to?"

Draco curled his upper lip and held up the bracelet. "Do you even know what charms are on this?"

She'd studied it several times. "A strong tracking charm— a complicated one, suggesting goblins helped. Various protection charms, but there is one more I didn't recognize."

"It's a charm created to monitor your emotions."

That caused her to pause. The thought of Titus monitoring anything so private made her stomach turn.

"If I put it on, can it be removed?"

Draco gave a sigh and walked toward her. When he got to her, he motioned for her to extend her wrist.

"If you'd put it on at Christmas, it would've been almost impossible to get off. But since you didn't, I was able to get the charms... readjusted."

"You went to the goblins."

"Goblins have no loyalty to wizards and, since the curse, have stopped accepting requests to use their expertise. Titus only swayed them by paying in old family relics... but I offered an even older one."

He wrapped the bracelet around her wrist. The leather was supple, soft, and fit perfectly. Titus had made the gift himself, but he'd paid a goblin to alter it.

"What did you do to it?"

"I replaced the tracking charm. He'll still think he sees you, but it's manipulated by me. The goblin struggled to remove the monitoring charm, since it had been created to be permanent, but he tweaked it to only show Titus if you're in mortal peril. I kept the protection charms in place, though you can now remove it at will, so it's been mostly defanged."

As if to show he was correct, he undid the clasp and let it slide off into his palm.

"This will only touch your skin when you're at the shop. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

"The thought of anything belonging to him being near you— It makes me feel no better than an animal. Some primitive beast." His hand traced the curves of her hips and her breasts, until his fingers curled around the back of her neck, tugging her close. "The only reason why I haven't found a way to kill him is the potential fallout, and that I suspect it might break your heart. Despite everything, a small part of your love belongs to him."

"I don't—"

"Stop. I know you aren't fucking *in love* with him, but you care for him. Because if you didn't, he wouldn't be able to hurt you like he does. And despite me wishing to rip away his claws, I can't fault you, because it shows your capacity to love, and how he grossly took advantage of it." His eyes narrowed, a sneer pulling his face into sharp contortions. Whatever possessive instincts he had seemed on edge, shattering his normal control. "But if you think I'll just *watch* from the sidelines while he attempts to manipulate you back to him with fear and threats, then you're mad. This—" he placed a hand over her heart. "Will be mine and only mine. And if he ever tries to take you back by force, I'll burn this whole wretched world to save you."

Hermione searched his face, reaching up to touch his full lips. He opened his mouth, capturing her fingertip between his teeth, licking the sensitive skin until she shivered.

He'd always felt like freedom to her, and perhaps, to him, she felt like hope. A potential for love that he couldn't find anywhere else. A last grasp at something more after having his life ripped apart, left with a cold father inside an even colder world.

Fated, he'd once told her.

*A million different lifetimes, and I think it would always be me and you.*

He'd chosen her long ago.

It was an obsession that didn't seem healthy, born of trauma. A part of her feared the intensity, another part wished to partake with abandon.

A sudden realisation sank into her as if someone had sparked a flame in the dark.

Perhaps she was framing her potential death in the wrong way. If everything meant nothing, then what did it matter if she allowed herself to freefall? The world would probably end in a snap before she could feel the impact.

If the purebloods escaped in excess and hedonism, then perhaps she should as well.

---

The idea took root. And it grew, twisting into a fever. Draco's fingers slipping under her knickers at night couldn't soothe it, because she wanted *more*. All day it lived under her thin skin, scorching hot, her nerves aching, needing something to fill her.

No matter what she did, she couldn't shake it. And then, on an ordinary Monday, while pacing in the garden, the fever turned unbearable.

Why shouldn't she enjoy the benefits of their arrangement? It didn't require any feelings.

The last thought felt like a lie, but it gave her an odd determination as she walked inside the manor and scaled the grand staircase, ignoring the attempts to talk by the portraits. One of them raised a haughty eyebrow, as if he could read her filthy thoughts.

"Mind your business," Hermione sneered, not even bothering to acknowledge the nosy ancestors.

She continued down the corridors until she reached Draco's study. Taking one long breath outside the door, she pushed it open.

Like most of the manor, his study was grand. He sat behind an heirloom desk, ornate and gaudy, inlaid with gold. Draco once told her that it had once belonged to a French king. Besides the desk, the rest of the room was surprisingly modern, the old and new mingling together in a way that she found pleasant.

Hermione waited for Draco to notice her entrance, but he ignored her, his concentration on the beginnings of a letter in front of him. Something for his job, she supposed, asking around for certain potions or talking to different buyers. He normally didn't like to be interrupted when busy, even by her.

As she suspected, he didn't look up.

"Draco," she said.

"In a minute."

He continued to scratch at the parchment.

Hermione grinned.

"Draco," she said again.

He huffed out an annoyed breath.

"I'm busy, Granger. I'm sure whatever you're wanting could wait for a moment— and don't look at me like that. The last time I tried to interrupt you while you were reading, you apparated away. And then, when I finally found you, you did it again. In a very rude way, I must say. So just give me thirty minutes, and then I can give you my full attention. These need to be sent out today."

She waited until he returned to work.

"Draco," she said again, enjoying pushing his buttons.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes and then went back to work.

"As I said—"

"I want to have sex."

His hand fumbled, and he tipped over the inkpot. It spilled across the desk and across his precious parchment, dripping off the sides.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

"I want to have sex."

The chair screeched and clattered as Draco stood and threw it aside, along with his quill, and stalked toward her. Ink stained the tips of his fingers. She noticed this detail as he picked her up by the waist, throwing her over his shoulder.

"I can walk."

"I'll be faster."

His steps were heavy but quick as he navigated the corridors. Hermione tried to sit up, but he manoeuvred her so she couldn't. She huffed in mock frustration.

"I thought you told me those letters were *very important*."

"I'll tell them I was procuring something precious and rare."

Draco made it to his room and flung her down. She landed sprawled out on the mattress, hair in a wild halo around her. She wanted to laugh, until she saw his expression— deadly serious, laced with open hunger.



"Take off your clothes." He remained standing at the end of the bed, staring at her. She sat up, so that her knees curled under her. "I want to see you fully."

"You first," she demanded.

He answered by ripping off his black shirt, pulling it over his head, leaving his hair mussed. His bare chest displayed his long toned muscles, paired with wide shoulders. The muscles sloped elegantly, little hills and valleys she couldn't wait to explore.

"Your turn. Undo that stupid fucking bow first. It's been tempting me all day."

"It's not stupid. It's the latest style from France." The top of her dress was held together by a silk bow, something Pansy ordered for her. Truth be told, she thought it ridiculous too.

"Undo. The. *Stupid*. Fucking. Bow."

Obedying him, she tugged on a strand of ribbon until the bow unravelled. When done, the dress sagged low on her shoulders. She hadn't worn a bra that day, because the support charms of the dress had been inbuilt. So when the voluminous fabric slid down one shoulder and then the other, the cloth waterfalled along her curves, pooling around her body on the bed, leaving her mostly bare for his inspection.

She wished to blush and began to cross her arms.

"Don't hide yourself."

Slowly, she let her arms fall to the side, allowing him to see what he wished. With his eyes skimming along her exposed skin, he didn't wait to be asked his turn. He yanked off his belt with one hand and slid down his trousers and trunks, leaving him as nude as the ritual under the moonlight. This time gentle sunshine kissed his body, and she found she liked it better. It made him almost glow, hair reflecting the light. Mercury eyes flashed as he returned her gaze.

Hermione didn't know if others found him handsome or not, but other opinions didn't matter. She could stare at him all day and never grow tired.

After a tension filled pause, he crawled on the bed after her like a predator, prowling low, and she leaned away from the movement. When he ripped the fallen dress away, throwing it off the bed, she collapsed on her back against the soft sheets.

It was then her nerves kicked in. The tremble of her body as she lay naked and exposed—something she'd never experienced. It felt like shedding some heavy plated armour. The only thing left was her knickers.

During every intimate encounter in her life, she'd worn at least some clothing, even if it was pushed aside.

Draco noticed her anxiety. He leaned down and kissed her leg, trailing up along her hips and ribs until he reached her breasts. His tongue lingered on a hardened nipple while staring up at

her. Cupping a breast in his hand, he examined it in a lazy manner he hadn't before, as if he planned to suck and toy with it all day.

"There's nothing to fear," he said. "It's all in your control."

"And if I say stop?"

"Then we'll stop, of course. I truly don't mind spending an afternoon just tasting your pretty cunt." He licked his lips. "In fact, I think that's exactly what I'll do."

He helped take off her knickers—the final barrier to complete nakedness—sliding them along her legs. And then he returned to teasing every sensitive part of her body. Her breast, down her ribs, letting his tongue play along the soft skin.

When he finally got to her thighs, she spread her legs wide in welcome, twisting her hands in the sheets with the heat scorching her skin. He licked and touched her with his acquired expertise of her body, until she was riding the edge of orgasm. And then he pulled back.

"You're so fucking ready." He crawled up her body, grabbed her hips, and positioned himself. The tip of his cock pressed at her entrance. But instead of moving, he stared at her. "I want to remember this moment," he whispered. "Look at me."

Her body wanted this, but her mind had other ideas. Her heart rate increased. Panic zinged through the excitement.

"Stop!" she yelled, withholding the instinct to push him away. He froze with the command.

Every cell in her body wanted him to fuck her, so why couldn't she allow it? Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the side, so frustrated with herself she wanted to cry. "I'm sor—" she stopped, knowing he hated when she apologised. "I can't do it. There's something wrong with my mind. I'm broken."

"You're not broken, Granger." Though he seemed frustrated too. "We don't have to do anything."

"And if I can *never* do it? What if this always happens?"

He gave a snort and leaned down, once again flicking a tongue against her nipple. She arched up into the sensation. The panic hadn't erased her arousal, and it sparked like flames along her body once more.

"You allow me to touch your cunt *at least* once a day, and you always volunteer to suck my cock. What the fuck is there to complain about?" He sat back, and then he tilted his head sideways, eyes narrowing with thought. "If you're willing to try one more time, I think I have an idea." He produced a wicked smirk and grabbed her waist. After a hard twist to the left, he rolled them, switching their positions. Her cunt rested, warm and aching, against his lower abdomen, feeling the easy inhale and exhale of his lungs. He rested his hands on her ankles.

"I thought we already tried this," she said

He rolled his eyes. "If you want to sit on my face again, you don't even have to ask. But no—I was thinking this might be a better way to start."

"I don't understand."

"On top, you're in *control*. Of starting. Stopping. The pace. You can use my cock however you please."

Hermione's whole body trembled with the words. The realisation awakened a dormant section of her mind.

Relief washed over her. Draco himself wasn't the trigger like she feared and sex wasn't either.

It had always been about force. The tension fell from her body, every barrier and wall.

For so long she'd been flung around, given little choice as to how her life would go. Agency was all she needed.

Instead of letting Draco fuck her, *she* was going to fuck *him*.

The arousal was so instant and intense that she swore her cunt dripped down his skin with her anticipation. She let herself study him, so ambitious and clever. She'd never known another man like him. He could think his way out of any problem, making sure it was what both of them wanted, making sure she never sacrificed parts of herself in his pursuit.

Her heart clenched in her chest in a painful way she didn't know how to explain, excitement and pleasure mixed with a dark desire.

Hermione couldn't stop herself. She bent down and kissed him. His warm full lips grinned against her and then kissed back. He slipped his tongue past her lips enough to touch hers, a gentle stroke.

"Take what you want from me, Granger."

Hermione slid her hips down. As if it was natural, the entrance to her cunt pressed against the length of his cock. She stopped, waiting for the familiar panic, but nothing came. Draco had been right. Control was what she needed. What she craved.

She lifted her hips enough so that the tip pressed into her. Draco groaned under her, his lungs and heart picking up the pace.

"Just like that," he said. "Show me how you want—"

He cut off as she pushed down slowly, wiggling to accommodate his girth, feeling him stretch her as she took him inch by inch, until completely seated inside her.

"Merlin fuck." He rolled his eyes back, fingers digging into the skin of her upper thighs, as if trying to ground himself.

Unlike the first time she'd had sex—scared, surrounded— this time the pleasure was just for them.

"You're inside me," she whispered in awe. The whole concept was strange and wonderful. She didn't think she could ever be more filled and complete than she was at that moment. "What do I do?"

"Move."

She lifted up and down and then gave an experimental rock of her hips against him, which pressed against her clit. A current went through her. Her lower body tingled.

Draco's fingers left her hips; he gritted his teeth as he dug them into the sheets.

She quickly discovered it didn't matter what she did. Not when they were both so on edge. She didn't need to worry about inexperience, because he loved every moment. So instead of being unsure, she focused on pleasure, on what movement felt good to her, until it took over her mind. Draco grabbed her breast, rolling her nipple under his thumb.

"You're so bloody perfect at this," he said. "Keep— oh fuck, I don't know if I can last long this time. I've wanted this too long."

She didn't hear him. Hermione was too lost, clenching on purpose around him loving the groans she forced from him each time.

"Granger, if you don't stop doing that—fuck, I'm coming." Draco thrust hard up into her, his moan almost sounding like agony. His fingers gripped her tight to him, and she felt wet warmth fill her.

They sat there for a moment as he panted. Despite not experiencing the orgasm she craved, pleasure buzzed through her. It didn't matter. What mattered was the intense revelation that sex didn't hurt. There hadn't been any pain at all this time. No triggers. No panic. She was no longer denied experiences by her mind, because he'd discovered the key.

Draco looked beautiful resting under her, crimson stains along his cheeks and chest from his own arousal.

"Fucking hell." He thumped his head back, closing his eyes in frustration, hands still on her thighs. And then he opened them, glaring at her. "You didn't come."

"It's okay." She moved to get off him, but he held her tight to him, cock still half hard inside her.

"Absolutely fucking not. You won't leave this bed without finishing. I have an idea."

Draco and his ideas.

Before she could reassure him that it wasn't necessary, he whispered a spell, and his finger began to shiver in an odd way.

"You know wandless magic?" Hermione asked.

"Only a little."

"How did you—"

He placed his vibrating finger against her clit, and her vision went dark as she leaned her head back, closing her eyes with a sharp gasp.

"Oh fuck!"

"That's it. Now let go. Give me your first orgasm while sitting on my cock." He made a small circle, and her eyes rolled back like his had earlier. Hermione did as he asked and finally gave in completely. By the time she came with the loudest cry she'd ever given, she was panting and trembling, clenching along the cock still resting inside her.

His hand slid away from her sensitive skin as the aftershocks coursed through her.

After the sensation passed, she collapsed against his warm chest, completely sated and connected. She basked in the pleasant aftermath, loving the way he trailed a hand along her spine, stroking her skin.

Sex wasn't what she expected. And it hadn't been perfect. But it was everything she hoped her first time would be— messy and exploring, both of them unsure and flawed.

She lifted herself on her arms, allowing her curls to dip down and brush against his chest. He looked happier than she'd ever seen him.

"Tell me why I waited so long to do that again. We could have been fucking this whole time." She gave into a strange impulse and leaned down to give a playful bite to his chest. "Let's do it again!"

He laughed. Both his hands grabbed her hips, roughly pushing along her skin to her arse, where he gave a firm smack.

"I just knew you'd be insatiable, but I'm going to need a few minutes to recover." His grin turned sly. "Until then—" he whispered the spell again, and his finger started vibrating. After a hard flip, she once again lay under his long, firm body as his hand slipped down, pressing in just the spot she wanted. "I'm going to discover how many times you can come in a row."

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: miscarriage (not Hermione)

# Chapter 38: Hiraeth

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Taylor Swift ft. Bon Iver- "Exile"

Thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for her thorough beta work! And also, a special thank you to my new alpha reading group for making this chapter a better finished product.

Surprise! I'm back. My break was shorter than I planned. Details on future updates at the bottom.

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

### Hiraeth:

**(n.) a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the grief for the lost places of your past.**

Time continued. A day turned to a week. And a week turned into a month. Before she could slow it down, the entire summer had passed her by.

Hermione escaped into a comfortable routine. On weekdays, she'd wrap the leather bracelet around her wrist and work at the apothecary. Titus stopped by just long enough to buy something and check her wrist. Satisfied with the compliance to his demands, he left again, promising to come back.

But the weekends belonged to lust. Always a quick study, Draco learned what pleased her, getting more proficient each time. Where to nip and stroke and lick. He liked to fuck her from behind, hands in her hair or on her hips, burying himself inside her as far as he could go. She'd lift her hips in the air, upper body pressed against the bed, frantic for more.

After revelling in their shared pleasure, she spent the rest of her days watching movies, practising occlumency, duelling, and reading voraciously.

Occasionally, her friends would stop by, and then on very special days, he'd bring her out to experience various muggle cities. Her favourite places were the abandoned castles. They dodged patrolling aurors while exploring the old deserted corridors, and she pretended to be one of the ancient queens she'd read about in her muggle history books.

A few times, he'd even convinced her to get on a broom, viewing the countryside of Wiltshire and the village that rested closest to his manor. It used to be filled with people, but had been mostly deserted since the curse.

She tiptoed through the abandoned houses and touched the appliances. The still photos. Evidence of a life interrupted. A tomb from a time before. Frozen in place.

It always left her with a buzzing disquiet, imagining she saw the muggle ghosts, watching her from the cracks of the past.

---

They were in the bathroom, having just finished a shower and drying off, when Draco paused in the middle of brushing his hair.

"Dolohov gave you permission to return to the muggleborn lunches, though you're still banned from the dinners."

Hermione withheld her grimace that she was being rewarded for inactivity. Since the debacle, she'd been banned from both events, until she— as Dolohov told Draco— showed proper training.

"Oh no, how will I ever cope without the orgy dinners?" She rolled her eyes, showing him exactly what she thought of that.

The week of waiting that followed proved hellish; she was desperate to finally see Julie after so long. The parties could go in the rubbish bin for all she cared, but the thought of seeing Julie again made her pace in the library daily in worry.

Normally, for her own sanity, she tried to shove away any negative thoughts, especially about Julie. It did nothing but make her feel miserable, powerless, and full of rage. During her occlumency lessons, she'd learned to place her worries about her coven into separate boxes and store them on the shelves.

But with the imminent return of Julie in her life, the boxes proved useless. The thoughts overflowed outside the confines, too many to control.

Since Hermione's banishment, Katie had been giving her brief updates, including that Julie was pregnant.

According to Katie, the bump had just begun to show, the only proof life grew inside. Beyond that, Julie sat in silence away from the others, shadows darkening under her eyes, concealment charms littering her pale skin— though fewer of them since the pregnancy.

But that didn't mean Julie was safe. Bruises could be healed. And if they weren't, it was because Blaise *wanted* people to see.

In the end, verbal reports didn't pacify her.

Hermione *needed* to see Julie herself.

---

On the day of the luncheon, Hermione wore an understated dress, attempting not to draw attention to herself.

They arrived via apparition—much to her discomfort— in front of an old cottage in the countryside with a thatched roof, painted a bright white. It belonged to Avery, Dean's old master. He'd just acquired a muggleborn that had been gifted to him from a friend. Avery didn't have as much money as many of the purebloods, and it showed in the sparse decorations and cramped spaces. As she entered, she glanced around in curiosity, trying to see if any trace of Dean was left, but she saw nothing that reminded her of her coven member and continued on, the voices growing louder as she walked up the creaking wooden stairs.

The room designated for the muggleborn gathering was usually created from the largest space in the dwelling. This time it was an old sitting room stretched to maximum capacity with extension charms, but still it felt cramped.

When they entered, Katie got up to greet her with a tight hug, leading her to her seat. She glanced back once to see Draco giving her a wink as he exited, knowing a part of her dreaded this.

As Hermione approached the table, Livia began a slow clap, staring at her shackles with curiosity.

"Heard you walloped that bastard. Only wish I could have seen it."

"Quiet, Liv." Zala didn't hold her little boy this time, but her belly was already rounded with another pregnancy. "We promised not to interrogate her."

"*You* promised that. I, on the other hand, require every juicy detail, since Katie's been oddly quiet about the whole thing."

Hermione spared a glance at her friend who was biting her lip.

"I'm— not allowed to speak on it ." Among the stipulations for her return was that she wouldn't talk about it, and neither could Katie. They believed it might spread dissent among the others, especially the fact she'd used an unforgiveable. Though the obsidian on her wrists caused speculation. She could tell by the covered whispers around the room.

"None of you are any fun," Livia pouted, and then her eyes turned sharp. "No baby yet?"

Hermione touched her flat stomach.

"Not yet." Hermione took a potion every day to prevent it. She didn't need anyone to tell her that her free time was running out, so she changed the subject. "Where's Abigail?"

"She's feeling under the weather," Zala answered gently.

"Pregnant again is what she means." Livia's voice lowered, and she sneered. "Rodolphus didn't even give her the full six weeks to heal before fucking her again, even with her hard birth. She's been so ill this time she can barely get out of bed."

Talk of Abigail hit a sensitive nerve. Hermione almost changed the subject again, but the door opened, and Julie walked inside. Blaise stood behind her, hand on the back of her neck. Much like the first time, Julie refused to look up, wringing her hands. Her strawberry blond



hair went to her waist, and her lower stomach sloped into a bump. But other than that, she looked like the same Julie she'd always loved.

Blaise met her glare. A flicker of something sparked in his gaze, before his lips curled in a cold smirk. As if he'd won. As if to say he could still do what he pleased.

She wanted to project into his mind the memory of him stuck to the wall, the death curse on the tip of her tongue. Wanted to remind him how he looked writhing on the ground at her feet. If she could, she'd show him what a pathetic mess he'd been. How a simple girl—*a house pet*— had him on his knees.

Blaise whispered something in Julie's ear. She flinched before he let her go, pushing her toward them and leaving.

With her tormentor gone, Julie glanced up, scanning the room.

*Look at me*, Hermione begged.

But she didn't. There was nothing in her expression. No sharp relief. No excitement to see her friends. She was absolutely void of any emotion.

Hermione's heart clenched as she watched Julie walk forward with stiff movements as if she was under the imperius. Bypassing the tables, she headed to the opposite side of the room, sitting on a chair next to the window, ignoring everyone.

Katie had told her it was bad, but seeing it caused her stomach to twist upside down. Hermione almost stood up, wanting to walk over to her, but Zala held her hand before she could go.

Looking around the table, she could see her friends regarding her with pity.

"Don't bother," Livia said, voice free of teasing. "Her master doesn't let her speak to us, and she won't disobey the order."

"If he doesn't want her to talk to anyone, why does he bring her?"

Zala gave a delicate shrug. "He's an especially cruel master."

Her thoughts were murderous; she imagined taking out Zabini's organs like Draco had done to Karkaroff.

For the rest of the lunch, Hermione couldn't pay attention to the small talk, her eyes on Julie as she stared into nothing.

---

Towards the end of the lunch, Hermione couldn't sit a second longer.

"I'm going to get more punch."

Really, she just wanted to get closer to Julie.

"I'll go with you." Katie stood up too, casting a warning glance. When they got halfway across the room, Katie leaned towards her. "What are you doing? Last time you—"

"I'm not crucioing anyone," Hermione whispered back. "I just want to see her."

"You can't mess up again."

Hermione rolled her eyes, and when she reached the refreshment table, she grabbed a plate and some biscuits.

"I thought you were getting punch?" Katie pointed out.

"Right." Hermione set the plate down and grabbed a cup, studying her friend as she poured a ladleful of the pink liquid.

If Hermione hadn't known Julie, she would have thought she looked serene, with her interlaced fingers and straight back. The sunlight brightened her skin, showing off every freckle.

Hermione wished to grab her shoulders and shake her, if only to produce a reaction. Something. Anything to show a bit of life and fight.

Julie's soul was slowly being smothered. It showed in every movement— and the lack of them.

As long as Julie was pregnant, it afforded her a minimal amount of protection. Judging by her bump, Hermione might only have four, maybe five months to execute a plan. Draco promised he'd kill Blaise, but they were running out of time.

"Does Bellatrix know about Julie's pregnancy?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not sure, but probably. Flint tried to grant me a visit, and Zabini denied it, saying Julie was in a delicate condition and excitement could harm the child. I bet he gave the same reason to her mum."

Something hardened inside Hermione, a focused determination. She couldn't stay inactive and sit on the sidelines as someone abused her friend, stealing every precious and soft part of her.

Killing Blaise might be off the table, no matter how much that sickened her. It would take too long. At the moment, the most important thing was to get Julie away to somewhere safe.

But where to take her? That was the deciding factor.

A memory of something important niggled at her mind, until she gasped. She stood still a minute, letting her thoughts coagulate into something concrete.

"If I was able to get Julie away from Blaise," Hermione whispered. "Would you help me?"

Katie reared back.

"Hermione, we can't—"

"Would you help me, or would you be a coward? Tell me right now if I can count on you or not."

The answer took longer than it should have. Katie's mouth opened and closed. Each silent second increased Hermione's agitation, until she almost trembled with it.

"I will," Katie said eventually. "But I refuse to do anything that will worsen all of our lives."

Hermione swallowed her annoyance.

"Don't worry, you won't have to help me with much. Just a little." She set down her glass and picked up a biscuit, slamming it on a plate.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Draco told me you're hosting the next muggleborn luncheon."

"Yes," Katie said slowly.

"Then I'll need you to get me the floorplans to Flint castle."

"The floorplans? Why would you— Merlin, I don't feel good about this. Please don't do anything rash."

Hermione didn't feel the best about it either, but she refused to let Julie stay in agony.

All she did know was that it wouldn't be impulsive. She'd plan it down to the smallest details, along with contingency plans.

At the end of the day, convincing Draco of this plan might be her biggest obstacle.

---

A week later, Hermione fidgeted with her clothing, touching the buttons on her conservative dress. She'd gotten used to choosing whatever she wanted to wear with no restrictions. But now she found herself in a dress in her old style, with the hem skimming the floor.

"You don't have to go." Draco touched the small of her back, mouth next to her ear.

She hadn't told him her plan yet, and she wouldn't until she held the essential pieces.

"I do."

"Why?"

"I have important things I need to retrieve." She kept her face forward, staring at the glowing cinders.

For her plan to work, she needed several items still at Nott Manor.

"I can give you anything you need."

"He has Hopper," she explained. "And my wand."

Draco's fingers clenched the fabric on her back and his lips pressed to the side of her neck.

"Don't believe his lies."

"He can't keep me there."

She'd sent a letter a week before, telling Titus she planned to visit to gather her belongings, which meant he'd be there, expecting her arrival.

Draco took in a deep breath and released it. "I want to go with you."

"He'd never let you."

*Come alone*, Titus had ordered in the return letter. It irked her to be ordered, but she agreed that this was one thing she needed to do on her own.

His fingers gripped harder before releasing, but he still hovered right behind her.

"You need to leave quickly before I stop you," he warned in a dark voice. "Because I'm seconds away from throwing you over my shoulder, taking you to our room, and convincing you to stay."

She stared at the fireplace once more, a yawning pit. A portal to her past. A journey to her old, gilded cage.

Grabbing the floo powder, she gathered her courage and stepped through.

---

Hermione landed in the sitting room of Nott Manor with her shackles firmly in place and the leather bracelet wrapped around her wrist, goblin-charmed to fool Titus into thinking it worked. If she wasn't careful, he might notice the difference in the calm emotions he sensed versus the ones she displayed.

Nothing had changed since she'd left. The same couches. The same delicate, old décor. A deep fear entered her that she'd blink and wake up to find her whole time with Draco had never happened. How many times in her life had she wandered into this room, waiting for Titus to get home? It even smelled the same, faintly of the soap that the elves used to wash his clothes—a favourite scent of his mother's, laced with cinnamon. While it calmed her, it also induced in her an odd grief she had no name for, a yearning for something irrevocably lost that she'd once loved.

Bitty appeared before her with a pop, floppy ears trembling, tears running down her grey cheeks.

"Mistress Hermione!"

"Oh, Bitty—" Hermione leaned down, arms outstretched. The little elf wailed, grabbed her long ears and fell into the embrace, crying against her shoulder. Hermione held her frail body as tightly as she could, soul aching with the touch. It wasn't just Titus she'd chosen to leave. It was also Tabitha. And Bitty. And Eddy. She'd left the old paths she wandered, and the comfort of a space she believed to be *hers*. How could a person return home, find it unchanged, and *not* feel an immense dislocation in the depths of their soul?

Hermione heard his boots before she saw him, scuffling along the tile in the other room. She straightened just as Titus entered. They both paused at seeing each other in this place. So familiar. So different. His hand went out and grasped the door moulding, eyes going from her feet up to meet her stare.

How strange it must be for him too, seeing her at the floo, as if she'd just been there waiting for him all along.

"I've come—" her voice cracked, and she stopped and cleared her throat. "I've come to gather my things, and then I must leave."

"You're invited to dinner," Titus said.

"I can't accept. I—"

"But Mistress Hermione, Eddy worked all day on the food just for you." Bitty tugged on her hand, and Hermione's grip tightened around the thin fingers.

"She's right. It would break Eddy's heart if you left before eating." Titus straightened, hand falling away from the moulding. "And Bitty worked so hard on cleaning. Despite whatever animosity you feel for me, you can at the very least give them a proper goodbye."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the obvious manipulation. He knew the elves being sad would make her weak. Besides Theo and Tabitha, they were the only family she'd had. Of course, she wished to tell them goodbye. But she'd given him specific instructions in the letter that she would only stay just long enough to retrieve her things.

He was right though— she didn't want to hurt their feelings.

And she did miss the elves.

"Just for dinner," she agreed.

The tight lines in Titus' shoulders loosened. He almost smiled, but it failed. He stepped to the side with an outstretched arm.

"After you."

---

They ate in silence. Eddy had made all her favourite dishes, and it tasted delicious, but Hermione found it hard to digest. She stared at her plate, attempting to ignore Titus' eyes on her.

He seemed to struggle to eat as well. He'd place a bite of fish to his lips and then lower his fork, eyes insistent on her, as if begging her to acknowledge him. It caused a glass shard to dig under her ribs, sinking into her heart.

This had been her home. So then why did she feel like an intrusive stranger? In her absence, she'd stepped through a different dimension, finding an alternative reality where she'd never been at the ancient dining table with the crawling serving ware. As if just a year ago, Titus hadn't been her moon and stars.

The mist stood between them, the web of secrets he kept. Things she couldn't bring up, knowing she wasn't supposed to know them.

"Have you been well?" Titus asked with a rasp to his voice. She couldn't look at him, afraid of what she'd see. Loneliness. Hope. Both gutted her.

"Yes."

He hadn't mentioned the lack of pregnancy like she thought he would, but she supposed he was relieved she wasn't.

"Good." He took a sip of water, as if to give himself something to do. "Why didn't you visit sooner?"

How could he ask her that? The moonlight had illuminated them both at the ritual. He deserved her cold shoulder.

Yet still, a gnarled fragment of love remained. Not in the way he wanted, but in the way of a girl desperate for love and family. It might always remain as a fractured hope, transforming into grief, and Hermione was beginning to understand that the grief of a lost family might last forever.

"I wasn't ready," she said.

"And you are now?"

"No."

"Then why have you come? Your things have lingered here for months waiting for your return, so there must be something else motivating you." Once again, he clutched the water glass tight in his large hand. "Is Malfoy mistreating you?"

"No, nothing like that, but I might need your help."

"Anything."

Hermione glanced up— this time finally meeting his gaze. He'd shuttered off his emotions, and she was grateful not to have to stare at the raw pain that reflected her own.

"It's Julie," Hermione said. "She's—Blaise is still abusing her, even while pregnant."

"Is the abuse affecting the pregnancy?"

Hermione clenched her teeth. "Why does it matter? It should be wrong, regardless."

"I'm not saying it isn't wrong, Sprite. I'm only asking for legal reasons. If I can help her in that way first, I will. You know abuse repulses me. Only a coward would physically harm an innocent, especially under their protection. But my hands are tied through proper channels unless he's hurting her in a way that might make her miscarry. Extracting her without the ministry backing me up would be risky, and I personally don't think it would solve much in the end."

Hermione doubted Blaise crossed that line. He could be arrogant and stupid, but not *that* stupid. He liked to push the boundaries just enough, though he sometimes misjudged it like he did when Titus took his fingers. Remembering Finch's back, she understood nothing would change. The ministry didn't care if the muggleborns were injured.

Hermione pushed her plate away, unable to stomach any more food. Titus eyed the movement and set down his own silverware.

"What was the deal you wanted to offer me?" she asked. "Back when I was in custody. You said you might consider helping her."

He narrowed his eyes and sat back, crossing his arms along his chest. She felt like they stayed in that suspended state of tension forever.

"I want this." He nodded toward the food.

"Dinner?"

"Time with you— your company."

It sounded like too little, and it made her wary.

"And what other conditions would be attached?"

"Merlin, Hermione." He rubbed his face with his hand. "I just don't want to lose you entirely."

"So you'd only want my conversation?"

He shrugged in a noncommittal way that left a lot up to the imagination. Sure, he wanted time with her, but he wasn't shutting off other avenues. She'd been around enough purebloods to understand the round about way they talked, saying nothing and everything. Leaving loopholes all over the place that they could capitalise on later. Believing him at face value would be a mistake.

"And what would you do with Julie?"

"Now that she's pregnant, I could possibly eliminate him, especially if it's a boy that can carry on the name. Though Nera might cause some problems. If you want the baby to stay with

Julie, I'll need to take care of Nera too, which would cause other problems. Either way, it will cost me a great amount."

"Where would Julie go then?"

"Someone that wouldn't mind raising another man's child for no gain. That might be the trickiest part."

"What about Goyle?"

He scratched the stubble on his jaw in thought. "Possibly. Though their lack of money right now might impede that plan. If I kill the Zabinis, Julie would become a ward of the ministry, and they would have to pay the set price."

She knew that would be all she could get out of him now, but she had still felt compelled to ask.

"This sounds like a significant amount of risk just for conversation."

Even with Titus' status as Mediator, he couldn't kill whoever he wanted, especially other purebloods. It would invite chaos into their carefully constructed facade.

"An afternoon once a week," he amended. "Just a few hours of your time."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

That sounded more like it.

"And if Draco denies me?"

"Then we don't have a deal."

It was clever of him. He probably thought Draco would deny her, resulting in her anger shifting from Titus.

Hermione bit her lip and stared off at the grandfather clock, giving its familiar ticks. The seconds passed by with a blink.

An afternoon a week at Nott Manor. Forever.

"I think it's time I gathered my things and said my goodbyes."

"Very well." Titus closed his eyes for a moment, then threw his napkin on the plate and stood up. "Perhaps seeing the manor again will remind you that this will always be your home."

"I'd like to do it alone."

He gave a sharp nod in agreement as she knew he would. Giving her space had always been his go to strategy to get back into her good graces, knowing if he pushed too hard, it would



only make her push back.

"Take all the time you need."

---

Hermione wandered the manor. No longer trapt, she now felt unmoored, capable of travelling through the walls if she wished, meeting different variations of herself along the way. She'd spent so many days traversing these same corridors, touching the same objects, it came as rote memory.

When she passed the suit of armour, she gave it a little hug, and its arm rattled as it snaked around her and patted her shoulder. She stroked the velvet curtains, before jumping through the diamond patterned floor, playing a game she liked as a girl where the white diamonds meant certain death.

When she entered the back sitting room, she perched on the red settee and gave a nod to the spinning ballerina. If she concentrated, she thought the ballerina might have given a proud nod back. She had an urge to rip the painting off the wall to take it with her, but instead, she stood up and continued her journey.

Hermione saved her old room for last, and when she walked inside, she ran her fingers along the edges of the mother of pearl handle brush on her vanity. The last time she'd touched it had been just before the trials. Setting it back down, she left it in its place. These weren't the things she needed. Draco gave her treasures and wonders to rival them, possibly even surpass them.

Beside the comb was her purse—the one she'd charmed. She didn't remember placing it there, so she knew Titus had. Picking it up, she slid it on her shoulder and continued her examination.

Hopper rested in the middle of the bed in all his matted, ugly glory. She scooped him up gently, finding he now smelled of Titus. She pulled back her head, staring at it. Had Titus held it? Her hands tightened on the soft body and cradled it to her chest, wondering why everything hurt so much. Back in her old space, all of her old emotions sprouted up again. The comfort of home, but burdened with loneliness and boredom. Constantly waiting for life to begin and start her adventures.

Glancing around, she got up and softly shut the door, making her way to the closet. After prying up the board, she gazed at her small treasures. Her friends' wands rested on top of the Nott ancestor's spell book. Under them both was the skin bound book. Even from her position, she could feel it pulse with power, a sickening sensation that latched on her cells like slime.

She reached for it, cradling it in her hand. The nefarious knowledge inside it called to her, enticing her just to open it and attach herself, promising monstrous vengeance on the wizards that wronged her. Blaise flayed open. Rosier without his head. Dolohov desiccated. Dark magic. Light magic. She wanted it all and would do anything to get it.

With great struggle, she set the book back in its hiding place. Draco warned her that it wasn't wise to play with this type of magic. He didn't deny her, giving her the choice, but he made it clear he thought it foolish. She trusted his judgement, even if it went against her instinct.

Hermione gathered the wands and shoved them inside her purse. Maybe she could get them to her friends. She almost put the board back into place, but she stopped, remembering something important. She dragged out the Nott book and shook it. A single paper fell—the message from the Order.

After placing the Nott book back into the hiding spot, she returned the floorboard into position and wondered if the books she hid would be lost forever. Would a future Nott wiggle up the board and wonder at why they'd been placed there?

That would only be if there were Nott heirs at all.

In a future without the mist.

Hermione put her hand on the floor and looked up to see the red cloak. It hung unassuming next to the dresses, as if it didn't represent everything Titus had hoped for their future together. Her stomach turned, giving her clarity through her grief.

With one look at her surroundings, she exited the room and then the manor, walking outside. Though the inside of the manor gave her conflicted, trapped feelings, the outside almost made her weep. Every blade of grass contained the entire cosmos of love and adventure she carried in her soul. The worst part about Malfoy Manor was the severely manicured gardens, the edges pruned to a perfect shape.

Hermione walked through the grass that seemed more overgrown than usual, staring into the hedge mazes, knowing every turn, twist, and bush that would transform into new shapes to confuse the wanderer. The fairy sprites could be seen huddling under the thorns of a rose bush, and she thought she saw a rogue gnome peeking from around a statue of a Gryphon.

The treehouse took her breath away as she neared it. And when she got close to the bucket, she almost buckled with the thought of never seeing it again—her sanctuary.

The bucket raised, bringing her to the top. After a certain time of their childhood, Theo never cared to spend much time here. And Titus only rarely peeked inside. The treehouse had been *hers*, an unspoken rule.

When she entered her old space, she stared at the old artwork tacked along the wall, already aged from the elements. The faux flickering fireplace. The portraits that she'd replaced long ago with pictures of her and her friends, of Titus and Theo. The circle of candles remained in the middle of the treehouse, and Finch's bugs still lived in the terrariums, charmed to be self-sufficient. Though, after a brief glance, she noticed some of the bugs were long dead, surpassing their life span.

Hermione went to the circle of candles, curled her legs under her and sat, staring through the window at the dying light.

---

She spent an hour in the treehouse, finding it hard to say the proper goodbye. She wished she could bundle it inside her purse and bring it to Malfoy Manor. But it wouldn't be the same. The treehouse belonged to the wild grounds, and she had merely been a passing guest.

Leaving it behind carved a piece out of her soul— a remnant of her childhood, when everything had been easy and sure. When she'd trusted Titus to keep her safe from the monsters.

Despite the drawbacks, she had a happy childhood— one she was starting to realise was rare among the muggleborns taken.

When she finally managed to climb down from the treehouse, she saw Titus standing in the distance, looking every bit the lord of the manor with his cloak whipping in the wind.

He kept his eyes on her as she walked toward him.

When she reached him, he lifted his hand to her cheek. Before touching her skin, he dropped it again.

"It's time I went home," she said.

His mouth twisted in a grimace, but he turned, and she followed him until they reached the front sitting room. Before she could grab the floo powder, she finally faced him. He didn't hide his emotions this time. His expression told the story of his longing and loss.

The intensity of it made her soul waver, hating to see his pain.

She was missing one important item.

"I need my wand."

Titus broke eye contact and reached in his cloak, taking out her wand. It looked small in his hand. The vines crawled up the wood. Even from a distance, it called to her.

"I shouldn't," he said. "You aren't supposed to be using magic at all."

"It's mine, and it's mostly sentimental. You gave it to me," she reminded. "And you promised you'd give it back."

"It belongs here, like you do."

When she grabbed it, his hand tightened for a moment, as if he didn't want to let go, but he did. Even with the shackles smothering her magic, she sighed in pleasure at the connection.

"Thank you," she said, knowing how hard that was for him.

Even years after receiving a wand, it sparked the same awe and wonder in her soul. Titus' agitation grew more intense after she tucked her wand in her dress pocket.

"You never gave me an answer," he said. "About dinner."

She'd made her decision in the treehouse. Like a trickster god, Titus' deals always held false bottoms, and she couldn't trust him. Each increment of change would require an extra slice of herself until he held everything he wanted in his hands. Titus had never given her direct promises in the deal he offered. What would he ask from her next? He might even begin to create the circumstances where she needed him. Despite his love for her, he'd use her desperation as a weapon. Any small tie to him would be exploited. It was true that he'd be able to achieve Zabini's death faster and more efficiently than Draco, but Titus' offer came with too many strings.

And in the end, she liked her plan better. Both carried personal risk, but at least hers would be enacted without endless surrender. And most importantly, she trusted Draco to help her.

"I can't accept."

Titus clutched the front of his shirt, right over his heart.

"Give yourself some time to contemplate it."

"I've already decided."

"No— just give me a chance to convince you." He walked over and knelt before her.

She steeled herself, hardening her heart as much as possible.

"I can't."

"What do you want from me?" He transferred his hand to the curve of her waist. "I'll do anything. Give you anything."

"I want nothing."

Titus gave a low groan and buried his head in her stomach, both hands gripping her hips tight to himself. Hermione almost shoved him away, but after a second thought, she placed her hand on his dark hair, twisting her fingers through the strands. At the gentle contact, he shuddered.

"I'm unable to let you go. I've tried. Every day is agony without you, and I've come to hate returning home. I'm sorry for not being honest about the ritual and about starting your trials early. Forgive me, Sprite. Have mercy on me. Let me show you how much I still love you."

Hermione let them stay that way for a moment, before she reached inside her pocket and extracted a small object. Once out, she unfurled it to reveal the universe in her palm. The crystal glittered under the light. She pressed it once, and the planets emerged. The lights were dim enough they glowed, spinning around them.

Titus pulled back and glared at them, but he kept his hand on her waist.

"I want you to take this back," she said.

"It's yours. It will always be yours."

She grabbed his large hand. Heated skin, rough calluses. She turned his palm up and peeled back the fingers, setting the universe inside, and closing his hand around it. The planets vanished. The stars stopped spinning.

"You're really going to deny my offer?" Titus' other hand slid from her hip. He seemed frozen. "A simple afternoon of your time once a week? Don't be foolish."

She doubted it would be just a simple afternoon. And more than that, the fact he didn't pull any more underhanded manoeuvres today set her on edge, glancing around for the trick.

"I've already stated my answer."

Titus' gaze remained on his closed fist, expression twisted into something hard. As if he hated the stars in his grasp. As if he might hate her now too.

"How did I never see how cruel you could be?"

"We both know you wouldn't be content with just my presence." Hermione grabbed all the strength in her soul and turned, leaving Titus and the universe he'd offered her, kneeling on the ground.

He stood, as if shaking off a trance, realising she was serious about turning down his offer that he'd been so confident she'd accept.

"Don't I get a say in this? You think you can just walk away from me as if we didn't love each other for over twelve years?"

That made her angry.

"I can. You can watch me if you wish."

He clenched the universe in his grasp, and his face tilted down into a lethal expression. "No one else can keep you safe in this world like I can, and I don't trust anyone else to do my job. So I want you to come back to the table right now, and we'll discuss the deal again. I'm willing to both offer more concessions and compromises, but this is your last chance. If you walk away, I won't offer any more deals. I will no longer negotiate."

Annoyance prickled inside her, spreading along her limbs. He'd never ordered her so threateningly. He'd never had to. There were very few times she'd said no to him, having little need to go against his wishes.

Today he'd see that her will had always been as hard as a diamond. That she'd only obeyed him before when she'd *wanted* to and only because she'd trusted him.

"Like I said, you can watch me."

She grabbed a handful of floo powder.

"Sprite!" Titus shouted behind her. His footsteps struck the ground hard as he walked toward her, as if he planned to tug her back. "Don't you dare leave—"

"Malfoy Manor!" And then she stepped through without looking back, consequences be damned.

When she walked into the sitting room, she uncurled her clenched fist, staring at the strands of Titus' dark hair held inside her palm.

---

Hermione found Draco in the master bathroom. Steam billowed out of the shower as she stepped into the humid room. Hermione took a moment to lean down and add the strands of dark hair to the back of the cupboard where she kept the poison. Earlier, she'd also deposited all of her belongings into various locations in the room.

After putting everything away, she turned back to the shower. Draco's body could be seen through the foggy glass. The sharp angles of his form enticed her as he braced one arm on the glass, glaring at her.

In answer, she stripped off her clothes, letting them fall onto the floor in a clump. And then she entered the shower, letting the steam bathe her before stepping under the stream of hot water. The water flattened her curls and dripped like tiny rivers from her body.

Draco cupped her breast, brushing his thumb along her nipple in a way that made her head tilt back.

"What did he offer you?" he asked

"Everything I wanted."

He sneered and exhaled. Leaning down, he sucked on the side of her throat, knowing the right way to slide his tongue along her skin so she pressed further into his touch.

"And did you accept?"

"I already have everything."

He groaned. Both hands inched down the sides of her breasts, over her ribs, tracing the curve of her waist.

"Draco, I—"

"No more talking. I trust you."

"But I—"

"I said I trust you, didn't I? And now I need you."

He turned her and pressed her into the glass, icy cold against her aching breasts. His hand dipped down, playing with her clit. It wasn't lazy or slow this time. But urgent, almost punishing, showing his barely controlled anger.

She spread her legs to give him access to her, his erection pressed to her spine.

"Say you're mine," he whispered in her hair.

"I'm yours."

He lifted her and entered her, and they both groaned at the connecting sensation.

"Say it again."

So she did, whispering it over and over again as he thrust so rough it hurt, and she tipped her head against his shoulder for support as he fucked her at a feverish pace until she clenched rhythmically along his cock.

With a groan, he finished inside her and kept his lips on her throat, as he held her tight to his wet body.

"Don't ever go back." He gave a rare demand, but it came out pleading.

Being in Nott Manor reminded her how restricted her life had been. How much freer she was with Malfoy. And it was more than sex. She enjoyed talking to Draco— about books or movies or magical theory. Travelling to places she'd never seen before. Learning new things every day.

"This is my home now— with you."

She stood still in his embrace, as he kissed and stroked her body, edging her arousal. The hot water ran down their skin, until he grew hard again and claimed her for a second time.

## Chapter End Notes

On Updates: So I missed posting, so I'm back earlier than I thought I would be! The month break did help. However, for my mental health, from now on, I can't promise a schedule. I will try to get one to three chapters per month, but some updates might be faster or slower. I also can't promise a designated day, but it will probably fall on the weekend or Wednesday. Each chapter will be a gift, and they will be ready when they are ready. Thank you for your patience!

# Chapter 39: A Silent Graveyard

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Anastasia Soundtrack– "Once upon a December" (First Half) and Galleaux– "Tether Me" (Last Half)

A big thank you to MyPrivateInsanity and my alpha group for all of their work helping with this chapter!

Check Trigger Warnings at the bottom of the chapter.

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

## A Silent Graveyard

Hermione spent much of the next morning practising how to present her plan to Draco. No matter how she phrased it, she couldn't help but realise that when she stated it out loud, it sounded absolutely insane. When she finally gathered the courage to ask him, finding him in his study, he spoke first.

"I have a surprise for you today," Draco said while standing and pulling on his cloak. "An early birthday present. It took me forever to find it."

Hermione had started to look forward to Draco's surprises. He always kept her entertained, bringing her on limited outings to the countryside and cities, meeting up with Katie and Flint in Diagon Alley for ice cream— anything he could get away with and some things that pushed the boundaries.

Used to Draco's random, spontaneous ideas, she held out her hand to take.

"Floo or apparition?"

"Floo at first, but then we'll need to travel by broom."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, about to tell him what she thought of that, but he cut her off.

"It's the only way."

Hermione breathed out hard through her nose.

"Fine, but I won't be happy about it."

"I'm sure you'll let me know the entire trip."

"Most definitely."



He gave a snort and grabbed her hand.

"It will be worth it. Have I ever let you down before?"

Not yet, but there was always room for a first time.

Because he was so good at occluding, she had to rely on subtle clues to know his emotions. Right now, he was shuffling his feet, showing excitement or nervousness. He displayed both in similar ways. She hoped soon to narrow it down like she'd been able to with Titus, but he remained mostly a mystery.

"Let's go then— surprise me."

She could always ask him to help her some other day.

---

The floo brought her to a muggle office building. When they entered, a few men jumped from their seats, staring at the floo with wide-eyed fear in the way muggles tended to stare.

Draco ignored them as he cleaned his clothes and then hers from the ample amounts of soot, but she found it hard to tear her eyes away from their fear.

The building seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it, as if it lived on the edges of some hazy memory.

After one of the men asked if they needed anything, they avoided eye contact. Further toward the door was an old wizard sitting in a chair who seemed half asleep.

"You're definitely a Malfoy," he said, cracking an eye open. "Look like your granddaddy, Abraxas. Knew him in my Hogwarts days." The man checked their parchments, using a magical device that scanned the scrolls. When finished, he asked if they needed directions to anywhere, but Draco said they were just there to see the countryside.

The man was supposed to give them a broom with a tracking device, but Draco slipped him another few galleons.

"You bribe like a Malfoy too." He blinked at the gold, pocketed it, and then leaned back and closed his eyes, indicating he wouldn't tell a soul. "It will be toward your right."

Once outside, Draco pulled out his sleek black firebolt, pulled her in front of him, and took off to the left.

---

They flew through the grey clouds, avoiding being seen by other wizards, using a disillusionment charm just in case. Wherever they were going, they needed to do it secretly. The thrill of it made her whole body brighten with energy, even if the fear of plummeting to her death dampened it.

When they began to descend, Hermione closed her eyes tight, trying to keep her breakfast down. Right before they landed, Draco secured his grip around her waist.

"We're here," he whispered in her ear. "We won't need to fly back."

"Thank Merlin." Her feet touched solid land, and she opened her eyes to find a dilapidated house. The windows had shattered long ago, and the roof sagged. The rose bushes in the front had overgrown, curling into the house, the vines creeping along the exterior. Nature reclaimed what humans attempted to tame. The yellow door was cracked open, and she saw evidence that small rodents had been in and out.

It took a moment for her to recognize it. Her memory erased the foliage, rebuilt the exterior, fixed the window— and then it was exactly how she remembered it.

Her mind conjured a little hand pressed against the door, footsteps running in and out. A woman's voice chiding her for leaving it open too long.

Hermione almost stumbled in shock, but Draco kept his arm wrapped around her waist until she regained her equilibrium.

"My home," she whispered. She'd dreamed of one day seeing it again, as if the act would heal something injured in her soul.

Though she'd forgotten the door had been painted yellow.

Hermione wasn't sure why that made her breath hitch. She'd also forgotten that her mother had planted roses, and that the doorbell had never worked. But how could she have forgotten the bright yellow, reminding her of the sun? She used to think it provided enough light even on dreary days.

"I promised you," Draco reminded her.

Hermione never really thought he'd be able to find it. It had been a wild request. The last memory she had of it was hazy, clutched in her father's strong arms as he ran to his death.

Hermione walked up the stoop, feeling disconnected from her body.

A terrible thought came to her.

"My mother—"

Draco shook his head. "Her body is gone."

"Do you know where she's buried?"

He hesitated and allowed a grimace to show. "They send muggle clean-up crews after raids, since dead bodies are a public health hazard that breeds sickness— and then they burn them."

So her mother had no grave to visit either.

Did they burn her father's body too? Or did it rot somewhere, bones bleached from time?

Hermione swallowed and glanced down the row of houses, all similar in look, all abandoned. It didn't seem as if anyone had moved back in after the first massacre.

"Can I go inside?"

"Yes, the stairs are a bit unsafe, but we can use the broom."

That's right— they had two floors. The bedrooms were above, the living spaces below.

Her steps to the door echoed against the concrete. The old wood of the door was warped and halfway off the hinge. Scorch marks still etched where the death eaters had blasted the doorknob away.

She pushed it open, hating the creak it made, and stepped inside. Her shoes squished against soggy carpet, rotten from years of being exposed to the elements. Animal droppings littered the corners, and foliage had made its way inside long ago.

She tiptoed in, finding the smell horrid. Hermione tried not to look too closely at the photos on the wall, because they all looked ruined.

She wandered around the house, avoiding the spongiest parts of the floor. The kitchen remained in good condition. A teacup rested on the table, as if forgotten. Had her mother sipped on it, while her father read her a story before bed?

She wished she could bottle the memories from the bones of the structure and pour it into a pensieve to peruse. All the little moments of her first years of life. She imagined her mother at the stove, and her father at the sink. Imagined herself in a highchair.

This was what had been stolen from her. The ordinary, everyday moments. Insignificant and yet everything.

The grief of it was too much. She had to move on. She couldn't continue to stare at the skeletons of her could-have-been life.

"Do you want to go upstairs?"

Hermione didn't. What would she find? A rumpled bed cover from when she tiptoed out to see the Death Eaters from the window. Would her old toys still be displayed, rotting remnants of old artwork? No, she didn't want to view the silent grave of her family.

She'd returned to her home to find her past decayed.

Hermione clutched at her chest, the phantom pains rising, the grief of her youth. The inconsolable agony of losing her mother and father at a young age.

She'd clung to Nott manor so tightly because she'd had nothing left. When Titus had told her there was nothing to return to, he'd told her the truth.

"No, I'm finished."

He gave a nod, and she kissed the tips of her fingers and pressed it to the rotten door frame, a goodbye to her brief muggle life, safe in the arms of her parents.

She had a new home now. It wasn't like the one she had before, or the one she had at Nott manor, but it was one she'd chosen.

"I have another surprise," he said.

---

This time they landed in front of a newer building. Magical, based on the feel of buzzing wards.

"Is this a hospital?"

She couldn't see a sign anywhere, but she thought she saw the lime green robe of a healer walk by one of the windows, and the building seemed for commercial use.

He shook his head. "It's a care home for old wizards."

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. Why would he bring her here? She didn't know any older magical people.

He grabbed her hand, and they crossed the wards. They let them in without even a warning buzz, indicating Draco had access.

An attendant sat in front of a desk up front, but she merely nodded in their direction before getting back to her administrative tasks, showing Draco had been here often enough to be recognized. Though she suspected most of the wizarding world knew him on sight with his trademark Malfoy hair. Still, no one stopped to question him.

Random healers passed them, sometimes guiding floating chairs with ancient wizards with long beards, and hunched witches. Magical people had long lifespans, but even they eventually all reached a point where they needed constant care until death.

Draco led her through corridors, mostly empty besides healers hurrying past them. They went upstairs and around corners until he stopped at a simple door, just as innocuous and plain as the others besides the number 86 nailed into the wood.

Draco reached out, gripping the doorknob, and then glanced back at her, searching her expression.

"It took me a long time to find her," he said.

"Who?"

The door opened without a squeak, revealing a small room with a bed topped with an old rose quilt. A religious object hung on the wall, something she'd discovered was called a crucifix—a symbol of muggle Christianity. Jesus, their god, perpetually dying on a cross. It made her pause, realising the person to whom the room belonged was not a wizard at all.

The room was outfitted to look less like a hospital room and more an average bedroom. A table with a frilly lace tablecloth. Odd delicate knickknacks.

Right in front of a window, looking out into the courtyard below, was a chair. And on the chair sat an old woman with knitting in her lap. The click of needles made a continuous noise, as the woman stared at the gardens. The hazy grey sunshine gave enough light to study her.

"Who is this?" Her throat tightened, knowing something before her brain did.

"Go closer."

The room smelled like an old person—a scent hard to describe but close to powder and flowers.

She walked her way around the furniture and squatted down in front of the chair, studying the woman's face.

The recognition came by instinct. The familiar slope of her nose, the bow of her mouth. Her hair had changed, and she'd gained many more wrinkles. But her eyes—brown and wide. If she glanced in a mirror, she'd see a reflection of them.

Hermione had thought she was dead.

"Grandmother?" Her voice choked her. The child inside her soul wanted to throw herself into the pillowy arms, lay her head in the soft lap like she did long ago. Have her fingers thread through her hair.

There didn't seem to be any recognition though, besides the clack of needles and a soft hum.

"What's wrong with her?" Hermione reached out and grasped her hand topped with wrinkles and paper-thin skin.

"The healers say she has a muggle brain disease called Alzheimers. Wizards get it too, but our potions are much stronger. She's on them now, but most of the damage is irreversible."

Unable to stop herself, Hermione leaned her forehead down and pressed it against the hand, feeling the fragile bones beneath.

"Where did you find her?"

Draco shrugged, still hovering in the doorway. "Some of her neighbours had done their best to take care of her. But they struggled, having to also provide for their own families. Before moving her here, I gave them a bag of galleons for their trouble."

To a wizarding facility. Given the bigotry permeating society, she knew he had to pull a few strings to allow a muggle inside.

"And the healers—"

"I vetted them personally."

The old woman blinked and stared down at her, as if just realising someone else was in the room.

"Jean? Is that you?"

Her mother's name. Hermione hesitated before answering, unwilling to upset the woman with the truth.

"Yes, it's me."

"Why do you never visit me anymore?"

"I've been— busy." Hermione's voice cracked again. She kissed the top of her hand— a hand that had once held her, bathed her, changed her. Hermione remembered being excited to go to her grandmother's house, though she didn't like the scratchy dresses required for church. Hermione wasn't sure when that stopped. At one point, the wizards took over and banned all religion.

Grandmother—that's the honorific she'd insisted on, wishing to be formal. She'd always been an elegant woman, always dressed nicely, always used formal table settings.

"I'll be back, I promise," Hermione lied. She wasn't sure how often she'd be able to visit. Even with a disguise, it would be hard without Draco by her side.

"That would be nice, dear. Next time, bring my little Rose. I do miss her so. The nice doctors say she'll come to see me soon."

Hermione sucked in a loud breath, trembling.

*Little Rose.* That was what she had called her. The revelation was almost more disturbing than forgetting the yellow door. Her memories were a butterfly's wing. Fragile, able to be shredded and then only viewed by patching the tears.

"I'll remember."

Hermione stayed with her head in her grandmother's lap for a very long time. At one point, her frail hands left the knitting and stroked her hair, as if a part of her remembered too.

But every hello had a goodbye, and eventually Hermione got up and drew her grandmother into a deep hug. The years they'd been separated were a giant wound, bleeding profusely. She'd never get that time back. She doubted her grandmother would ever recognize her as an adult. Her little Rose might as well be in a grave alongside her parents. How frightened her grandmother must have been to have survived by herself.

Hermione stood up, releasing her. She seemed to be getting agitated, picking up her knitting, the clicking becoming disjointed as her hands began to shake. Hermione didn't want to distress her with things forgotten.

She would one day come back to visit her again, but right now, she needed to escape the fossilised memories that had just been excavated in her soul, chipped away, seeing everything turned to stone.

She walked slowly to the door, but before she exited, she turned to Draco. His face was expressionless, but his fist clenched. A nervous tick, she believed. She grabbed the sides of his face and drew him into a kiss. His hands curled into her hair in response, and he relaxed with the touch.

"Thank you," she whispered after pulling away. "You have no idea what this means to me to know she's alive and somewhere safe."

He gave her a sharp nod and followed her out.

---

After arriving back at the manor, Draco turned to her.

"I have one last surprise."

He dug in his robe pocket and extracted a letter.

"What is it?" She drug her finger along the paper, and it cracked open. A piece of parchment rested inside, and she pulled it out.

No, not a parchment.

A photograph.

Faces stared back at her. Ones she'd long forgotten in the folds of time. Ones she thought lost forever, stolen from her.

The figures on the photo didn't move, showing the muggle origins.

Her father held her on his hip, and her child self clutched Hopper close. He grinned at the camera, while her mother stood beside them, so beautiful under the sunlight. Hermione resembled her a little, though she looked more like her father.

"I remember this," she gasped. She had dreamed of it while recovering from Karkaroff's dark curse.

They had been at a stream, the creek bubbling behind them. It was in the middle of the starvation period; her parents had frequently argued about food at the kitchen table. She thought she might have had her first bout of accidental magic. Her parents knew what it meant instantly, since the wizards had already revealed themselves, hunting for muggleborns. A dark-haired man with tattoos had arrived at their house the next day and said the Order would attempt to protect her, perhaps wanting to take her with them, but her father refused to give her up.

She could connect the dots now. The Order had found them first and offered protection, but they didn't have the resources to shelter all of them. Instead, her father offered to work for

them.

That day at the stream had been their last vacation. Her mother had insisted on it, wanting to feel normal, like they were still in the time before the curse.

They'd splashed in the sun. She'd caught tadpoles and run barefoot over the smooth creek bed, finding the goldfinch feather.

Before leaving, they'd asked another person to take the picture. Looking at the photograph, these memories played out in her mind. She wished she could enter the photo and experience again that last happy family outing.

Shortly after this, everything had ended.

Hermione glanced up. Like always, he didn't wear an expression, but his fingers twitched.

"I don't want you to occlude around me," she said.

Draco struggled to do as she asked, but she saw the intentional loosening of the muscles in his shoulders. The way his mouth relaxed. But his eyes changed the most, from a steely, cold grey to something warmer.

"Is that better?"

"Almost. You know so much about my wounds, but I know little of yours. You don't have to hide your past from me anymore." She paused when he recoiled. "But— you don't have to tell me, of course."

"But you want me to?"

"I do."

"What would you like to know?"

Hermione thought about it.

"Deanna."

"I don't—" he glanced away. "You're right. It's unfair for me not to tell you. Though I'd prefer to show you instead."

He reached up and cradled her head in his hands. She didn't need to ask, understanding he planned to perform a projection like he did during the ritual.

"Look into my eyes."

She did as he asked. Months of occlumency practice made it easy. The intrusion no longer felt strange, and he fit inside her conscious thoughts comfortably.



"Don't look away." He dragged his thumb along her cheekbones and then the images began, reminding her of viewing a memory in a Pensieve.

---

A little Draco ran through the corridors. He had a play wand and a toy broom, and he seemed to be on his way to the floor. Blond strands of hair kept getting into his eyes as he turned the corners.

"Father I—" Right as he entered the front sitting room, he pulled to a stop.

A beautiful woman stood at the fireplace next to a younger Lucius— possibly the most stunning woman she'd ever seen in her life, besides Zala. She looked to be in her twenties with curly dark blond hair that reached her waist. On her arms were tattooed vines and flowers in an arresting pattern. The only imperfection were her eyes, red and puffy, as if she'd been crying.

Hermione couldn't help but think the woman resembled Narcissa, though possibly even more beautiful. It almost hurt to look at her. Lucius had a heavy hand on the back of her neck, leading her somewhere.

From what she knew, Deanna's trial had lasted a day for formality. Lucius rigged it, and no one went against him seriously. Hermione assumed she hadn't been a virgin, because it was still daylight, meaning she had been spared the horror of the ritual.

When Lucius noticed his son standing in the doorway, he paused.

"Who is that?" Draco asked.

"Her name is Deanna, and she will be living here."

"Living here?" Draco's brow crinkled in confusion. "Wait— is she a mudblood?"

Deanna's mouth cinched tight in displeasure.

"She is," Lucius answered in a flat voice.

"Send her back. I don't want this one. I wanted the other one!"

"Draco," Lucius warned. "Deanna's not your mudblood. She's mine, and I won't be sending her back."

Draco seemed put out, colour rising on his cheeks. His eyes went from Lucius to Deanna. Back and forth, until they grew frighteningly cold for one so young.

"I won't ever like her. You can't make me."

"You don't have to like her," Lucius explained. "And you don't have to be around her. After she gives you a sibling or two, we could sell her to someone else."

She didn't miss Deanna's flinch, or the way Lucius tightened his hold, as if to remind her of something. Draco stood up.

"Well, I don't want a stupid sibling either."

"Sit down—" Lucius began but Draco had already run out of the room.

---

The setting changed. Draco looked around the age that she'd seen him at the party. His blond hair fringed his eyes, and he hesitated before a closed door. His hand went to the doorknob and then dropped it. Finally, he seemed to gather his courage and opened the door.

Hermione recognized the room, but she'd never been inside. An atrium, with plants. At the moment, it was splattered in colours. Giant canvases were spread around. Some finished. Most half done, filled with abstract art, blocky shapes and splashes and drips.

In the center of the room, Deanna perched on the edge of a stool. She had her hair bundled on top of her head, with a paintbrush clenched in between her teeth and another clutched in her fingers. She was examining the painting in front of her, framed by the sunlight—so beautiful a scene it was almost a painting in itself.

Draco didn't seem to notice. He waltzed in confidently, all traces of nerves erased. He sneered at the paintings.

"I'm not sure why my father allows you to participate in muggle art."

Deanna didn't look up from her painting, but she thought she might have seen a roll of her eyes, biting her bottom lip.

"To entertain the mind," she answered. "Your father lets me do anything I want if it means I'll comply with his other silly demands."

Draco's frown deepened. "Well, you must stop this at once. I need to ask you something."

Deanna sighed. She placed her paintbrush gently on the stand and turned her body toward the boy.

"I'm not sure anyone has told you this yet, but being demanding is an obnoxious trait. You're getting too old for anyone to find it endearing."

"Father is demanding."

"My point stands."

Draco went to one of the empty canvases and stared at it. "How do you choose your colours?"

"Instinct," she said. "I thought you wanted to ask me something."

Draco picked up a paintbrush. He hovered over the green paint a moment before he chose a blood red. He dipped it inside, and then made a slash across a painting that had been completely finished.

She waited for Deanna to get angry at the destruction of her work, but the woman only considered the canvas with her head tilted.

"What do muggleborns like?" Draco asked.

Deanna just blinked a few times. "What do you mean?"

"There's a muggleborn. A Nott ward. I got to meet her at a party and offered her my friendship, but she—" he dipped his head down a little and frowned. "Well, what do muggleborns like? How can I get her to be my friend? I could buy her all sorts of things, but I have to know what she likes first."

Deanna was still for a very long time. "Is this the muggleborn you talked about the first day I arrived? The one you said you wanted?"

He nodded, not seeing the wariness Deanna displayed. "Her name is Hermione. I hadn't seen her since we caught her. Thought she would be happy to see me too, but she wasn't, and I'm still not sure why. She got mad that I called her a mudblood—"

"She was right to be angry," Deanna interrupted.

"But I promised I wouldn't call her it again, so she has no need to be. I think she would have gotten over it, but her stupid brother interrupted us." He glanced back at her. "Which is why I wanted to ask you, since you're a muggleborn, you must know what would make her want to be my friend."

She shook her head, as if getting rid of a bad thought.

"Draco," she said slowly. "Muggleborns aren't all the same, just like purebloods aren't the same. We're all *people* and like different things. If you want to be her friend, you'll have to go about it in the normal way."

Draco made another slash of red with a scowl.

"Father said that I needed to show people that to mess with me would be a bad idea. That if I wanted to rule Slytherin, then I needed to be mean until the others followed me."

"Your father is the most manipulative, cold man I've ever met. What would he know about making friends? If you want Hermione to like you, then you must first treat her like a person. Figure out how she likes her tea, her favourite colour. You have to try and *be* a friend first, and if you're kind enough, then I promise that she'll like you without having to force her to. And if you do try and force her, she'd just pretend to like you, but she'd hate you behind your back. Do you understand?"

Draco slashed again, though his frown deepened.

"If I figure out everything about her, does that mean she'll like me then?"

"It—" she seemed to be thinking, staring at Draco thoughtfully. "It's a start."

"And then she'll be my breeder?"

Child Draco didn't catch Deanna's flinch, but adult Hermione caught the small glance of horror. She now understood the dread— an innocent child raised to produce children, shackled to an emotionless, manipulative, cold man.

"Let's work on making friends first. Tell me the whole interaction from start to finish, and then I'll explain what you can do to help salvage it."

There was a gleam in Deanna's eye, a determination when she stared at Draco. Hermione wondered if the woman was a little manipulative herself.

Draco gave another slash, and the red dripped from the lines, covering the previous art.

"Aren't you angry I ruined your painting?"

Deanna stood up and got closer to him. "Should I be?"

"I thought you would be."

"Emotion creates art," Deanna replied, ghosting her fingers over the violent slashes. "It can never be wrong. I think it was you who was angry, but you don't need to be with me." She tapped a dot of red and then playfully tapped his cheek, smearing it. "Perhaps you'd like to come paint with me tomorrow. I'll even let you choose the colours."

"Paint with you? Why would I want to paint with you? It's a pointless muggle activity."

His tone came out harsh, but his eyes betrayed him, and she knew he really did wish to paint. It occurred to Hermione that it might have been the first time anyone had ever asked him to spend time with them.

---

The next memories flew by. Fragments of life, all of them happy— painting, eating ice cream, swimming in their pool.

Draco hovered on a broom far above the ground.

"Look what I just did!" He gave a flip, and below Deanna stared up at him, sitting on a picnic blanket, clapping her hands.

Then they were across from each other, playing chess. Draco shouted with triumph, but she suspected Deanna might have let him win when she raised an eyebrow and hid a smile.

The next memory was familiar, the echo of voices from the night of the ritual.

A young Malfoy stood in front of the mirror. He had his pale hair slicked back in the pretentious way he used to wear it, and he held Hopper in his hands.

"This is yours." He held out the old bunny, as if someone could grab it. "I hope you don't mind that I slept with him sometimes—" He cut himself off and shook his head, cheeks brightening, as if he hadn't meant to say that. "No," he scowled. "That makes me sound stupid. She wouldn't want to be friends with a ninny."

"I think she would," Deanna said, though she couldn't see her face. "Being kind doesn't make you a ninny. She'll be so relieved to have him back, I think."

"I'm not sure I like being kind. Besides, maybe she's forgotten the dumb bunny."

She took a moment to answer.

"We never truly forget the things we love."

Draco lowered the bunny, glaring at it. "This is a waste of time. I'm not sure why you're making me practise this. I can't give it to her anyway. Theo doesn't like me near her."

He turned with a scowl. Deanna was sitting on the end of the bed, looking deep in thought. "Maybe you could make friends with him at school. Perhaps you'll even be in the same Hogwarts house. And then when Christmas comes around you could send it back with him as a present to her, along with a letter to apologise."

His little scowl deepened. "I don't like her brother. He tried to tell me what to do."

Deanna rolled her eyes dramatically, and the scenery changed abruptly.

This time they were side by side on a couch, with a book open between them. She listened with rapt attention as Draco read her the story about dragons and manticores and a dark wizard who wanted to steal a princess. The door opened and Lucius walked inside the room. He paused, watching Draco and Deanna for a moment. He wore the same occlumency shields as his son, but his eyes froze on them for just a second longer than normal, and it looked like he might say something.

Hermione wondered if Lucius hesitated because he worried how close his son was to someone he viewed as disposable, or if a part of him wished to join them. It didn't matter, because instead, he left the room.

---

The next memory jumped through time, and Draco lingered longer. He'd just gotten home from Hogwarts, his trunk floating behind him. He seemed possibly in the third year of Hogwarts.

Lucius peeled off his gloves, and Deanna—who had been waiting for them to get home—surprised Hermione by throwing her arms around him in greeting. Lucius didn't loosen his stance or embrace her back, but he didn't push her away. One of his hands reached down and

caressed the barely noticeable bump on her stomach. It was more affection than Hermione expected him to show.

After letting go of Lucius, she walked to Draco, who was patting off the soot. "I'm so happy you're home for Christmas." He flinched for a moment into her touch before he melted, giving her a hug in return. After pulling away, he blinked in confusion at her rounded stomach.

"I thought the healers said you couldn't get pregnant." Draco blushed a little after he said it, shifting on his feet.

"They said it would be difficult, not impossible. Your father decided to wait until it was further along this time to tell you. I should be due around the start of the summer."

Remembering what Draco had told her, Deanna suffered from a chronic illness, making it hard to keep pregnancies. Past the smiles, her features seemed tense and drained of any healthy colour.

"Oh," Draco said. He didn't sound too thrilled about the prospect of a sibling.  
"Congratulations, I guess."

Deanna rolled her eyes and ruffled his hair.

---

What must have been a short time later, Deanna was eating breakfast with Draco. Lucius wasn't there. Deanna placed her hand on her stomach, stroking it over and over. Her gaze was trained to the side.

"Is something wrong?" Draco asked.

"I think I've had a vision."

"A vision? Like a seer?"

"I don't know."

"But you don't have any seer blood. Ignore it."

Deanna shook her head.

"My instincts are never wrong. The colours. This time they were blacks and greys—ones I've never been led to use before, even during my worst moments."

"I don't understand."

"I think I'm going to die," she explained. "I think this birth will kill me."

"Nonsense," Draco said, but he set his silverware down. "Father hired the best healers money could buy. He's even transferring that renowned one from Switzerland."

"Healers can't change my fate."

"Don't—"

"No, Draco. You don't have to believe me, but I want you to listen to me."

Draco hesitated, but he gave a nod of his head for her to continue.

"If I die," she said, still stroking her stomach. "You need to remember what I told you. One day, you'll get to the age where you'll need to choose what kind of man you'll need to be for the woman you love."

"But you're not—"

"Let me finish," she admonished, voice strained. "No matter what they try to tell you, you can't own people. You may own their bodies, but you will never own their minds. It's criminal what they're doing. Against nature. I love you as if you were my son, and I'd grieve like a mother if you turned into a monster. Do you understand? If you ever win Hermione, don't you dare hurt her or take away her autonomy. Don't you dare— fucking hell." She wiped a tear away. "None of those poor children deserve this."

"I wouldn't—"

"Don't lie to me about the person you could be. You bully your classmates, acting just like your father, despite my pleas for you to be kind, and I— I can't die peacefully with the thought that you might become like them, so I want you to promise me right now that you'll be different."

The table went silent for a long time. Draco was clenching his jaw tight, staring at his plate.

"You're not going to die," he said, as if he said it firmly enough, it would come true.

"Promise me!"

Draco swallowed hard. He barely seemed to move. "I promise."

The silence stretched between them.

With his compliance to her demand, she slowly relaxed and then placed her head in her hands and wept.

"Oh, Jesus Christ, you're just a child too."

---

Hermione was thrown out of her head for a moment. It was a bit of a shock to get back to reality. She understood now why he cared for Deanna. She might have been the first person to show him any sort of attention or affection, encouraging him to be better.

It didn't work entirely. He still bullied others, including Theo. He made sure to be the top of the pack at Hogwarts, just like his father wanted. He killed multiple times and was capable of

stomach-turning torture. And she could see under it all, he could be terribly cruel and callous if he wanted. But Deanna's efforts weren't in vain. She saw the remnants of them in the man before her—making him able to give and receive love in a way his father never could.

Draco stroked her cheek.

"There are two more memories I'd like to show you, but they are the worst of them."

Hermione's heart clenched, a little afraid of what she'd find in his mind, but she gave a nod, wishing to understand him.

She let him in.

---

Her vision went dark, and the edges of the memory came into play.

A healer in a green robe stood in front of Lucius. Draco stood behind him. A horrific scream rent the air.

"The child didn't make it."

Lucius seemed frozen.

"Say that again," his voice lowered dangerously.

"The child passed in her mother's arms."

Lucius' looked abnormally shocked. He opened his mouth and shut it. "It was a girl?"

The healer gave a nod of affirmation.

"And Deanna?" Draco asked behind them. "Is she okay?"

The healer hesitated.

"We've done everything possible—"

"Do more," Lucius demanded in a voice that would scare a normal person.

"I'm sorry. We're trying everything, but the blood keeps—"

Draco rushed forward, pushing past both his father and the healer.

"Draco!" Lucius shouted, but his son ignored him, sprinting into the room, where he hurtled to a stop.

Healers busied themselves around Deanna, but it was already useless. She lay in a bed with her hair slicked to her head in sweat. Blood covered the bottom part of the bedclothes.

A little bundle of cloth rested in the crook of her limp right arm, tilted so the face wasn't visible. It looked like the aftermath of war, of violence. As if she'd been tortured. And she



had, Hermione realised. She'd endured one of the greatest pains a person could experience.

And still it meant nothing. The labour only birthed silence and pain.

Draco walked forward, as if tiptoeing across muggle explosives.

Deanna's eyes were open, but already empty, so different from the beautiful, vibrant woman she'd been. Her skin was leached of colour, already a grey pallor. Nothing of her was left.

"Mum?" his voice cracked, but she wasn't alive to hear him.

---

Draco stood in front of a small headstone. Hermione recognized it as the small cemetery on the Malfoy grounds. His mother's giant mausoleum was on the opposite side.

The sunshine brightened the day; birds chirped, the clouds meandered. It was so peaceful, besides the young man dressed in stark black robes, wearing a sombre expression.

The headstone only said Deanna.

Hermione wondered what her last name had been. Had she ever told anyone, or did she keep that information all to herself?

A little gravestone was beside them. Carina Malfoy, it read.

Draco buried his face into his hands just as a crunching of grass came behind them, and Hermione saw Lucius approaching. But when he reached his son, standing behind him, Draco didn't turn to greet him. Instead, he dropped his hands, showing a blotchy red face, eyes watering. He glared at the headstone.

"We should have buried them together," Draco said.

Lucius hesitated.

"It didn't seem proper at the time."

"What if she's cold—Carina. What if she's lonely? I think she would have been happier in the same casket as her mum."

A long silence followed.

"Son, they're gone. They can't feel anymore."

"No thanks to you," Draco hissed.

"Careful how you speak to me."

Draco grit his teeth, balling his fists.

"Or what? It's all your fault. All of this," he swung out his arm, pointing to the graves. "Deanna would have still been alive if you hadn't gotten her pregnant. You knew she wasn't healthy, and you still made her." His voice caught on the last words, followed by a choking sound, as if the swallowed emotions were shards of glass, lacerating on the way down.

Lucius laid a hand on Draco's shoulder, but he shrugged it off violently and twisted, raising his fists as if he'd strike his father.

"Draco—"

"It's all your fault!"

Lucius reached forward and grabbed Draco's shoulders.

"Don't touch me!" He fought, hitting Lucius' chest, but it was half-hearted, flatlined by grief. "I fucking hate you."

Lucius dragged his son into a tight hold. Draco was taller than in the past, coming up to his nose. He wasn't a little boy, but he clung to his father like a young child, crying against his shoulder.

"I fucking hate you," he whispered again.

Lucius' jaw clenched, though he didn't show any other emotion. "I promise to never get another breeder, Draco. It's just me and you, until you find your own companion. Whoever you want. I promise—"

"Hermione," Draco said. "I want Hermione."

"The Nott ward?"

"Yes."

She saw the wheels turning in Lucius' eyes, as if calculating plans. "I was considering her as your breeder regardless. She shows promise of power, but a breeder doesn't make a good companion. Perhaps you should consider another—"

Draco tugged out of his father's hold, face now devoid of emotions, putting up his own occlumency shields.

"I don't want any others."

"Okay," Lucius agreed. "Then she'll be yours."

Draco went still for a long time. "I don't know if I'll ever forgive you."

There was a moment—a single flinch—where Lucius let down his shields. His whole face wrinkled in pain before smoothing out.

"I know."

---

Hermione hurtled back to reality with a gasp as Draco lifted his fingers. Her throat burned with emotion. Seeing Draco like that, clinging to a father he both loved and hated, made something inside her shatter.

He'd lost so much. Two mothers and a sister. He grew up sheltered but lonely, distanced by his father's Machiavellian complex. She believed Lucius loved his son, but much like Titus, it became twisted in its expression. He gave his son everything except what he really needed.

She knew a big part of Draco obtaining her was due to Lucius' machinations. He wanted to give his son things that made him happy. In some ways, he protected him from the truth, like with the boundary. But in other ways, he exposed him to things he shouldn't have. A violence resided in Lucius, and he passed it down to his son.

Draco stared at her, hands still resting against her cheeks. He searched her face, for once vulnerable before her. All his secret pain was exposed. She took a deep breath and released the tension inside her, the tight ball of resistance, the fear of being betrayed again.

"Do you see now?" Draco placed his hand on her chest, right above her heart. "The only thing I ever want to own is the one thing I can never take."

Hermione was ready to fall and crash and burn. What else was worth the risk of injury besides what stood before her?

*Pain is the price of love, but it's worth paying.*

"Do you—" she started, but he caught her off guard with a firm kiss, half searing, half gentle.

"I'll be different for you. Different from all of them." His lips hovered over her. He smelled of mint and of Hopper.

"But do you lo—"

Again, his lips cut her off, and her stomach swooped. His hands slipped to her lower back and pressed them together.

"Let me be your safety," he said, mouth trailing down her neck. She leaned to the side, letting him taste and tease as he pleased. "Let me be your sword. Your shield. Let me be your everything."

He undressed her with the precision he usually did, but achingly slower. He kept his lips on her as he unbuttoned her dress, as he slipped it off her shoulders, as he unhooked her bra and then slipped his thumbs past the edge of her knickers. She stopped trying to press for answers to her questions, and instead let him show her.

After stripping her out of her clothes, he laid her down on the yellow couch, running his hand down the soft skin of her thighs, tracing the scars on her lower stomach, following the sloping contours of her curves.

He gently lifted her legs, guiding them around his waist. They never had sex like this, with him hovering over her. It had always cut too close to trauma. Sensing her sudden fear, he kissed her again. "Let me have your trust."

He waited. She knew what he really wanted. It was more than trust, and he wouldn't push past her hesitance without permission.

"I'm here because I want to be," Hermione assured him. "You didn't force me into anything. It took me a little to realise it, but you saved me from a lifetime of imprisonment. Deanna would be proud of you. And I think— well, I think I'd like to be everything to you too."

"Granger," he groaned, tightening his hold on her hips. The fear she'd had with this position was the intimacy, the sound he made. The look in his eyes as he stared down at her. Could two people ever be closer than they were now?

A desperation flashed in his eyes as he pressed tight into her. With a gasp, she grabbed at the edges of his shirt to go even deeper.

His strokes were strong and slow. Fully sheathing himself before dragging out of her in exquisite torture, and then after a hard thrust, he'd let himself linger inside, as if to stay as connected as possible.

"Faster," she begged.

"No."

He grabbed her hands, tangled their fingers, placing them above her. She tried to take over, lifting her hips, but he wouldn't let her get lost in pleasure, forcing her to stay in the moment while looking into his eyes. The connection was too much. The heat inside her rose higher and higher, until she almost sobbed.

He didn't let her orgasm easily. He drew it out as long as possible, kissing her whimpering screams as she clenched around him with her climax, legs tightened around his hips, heels digging into his lower thighs, as she arched into the oblivion.

"Fucking hell," Draco groaned as he came inside her, resting his forehead against hers. "You've ruined me."

---

Art by [Cabrlita\\_10](#)



## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings: character death, birth trauma, stillbirth (all in a memory)



# Chapter 40: Best Laid Plans

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Three Days Grace- "Get Out Alive"

A big thank you to my beta, MyPrivateInsanity, and my alpha team. They really helped me tighten the plot in this chapter!

On Obsidian Shackles: back in 2018, while writing Brand New World, I'd stumbled on an article about how ancient pagans believed obsidian to absorb magic. I didn't research it beyond that, so I'm not sure how true that is, but in the lore for my stories, it's used in shackles and prisons to subdue magic. Obsidian is a fragile stone and breaks easily, but the shackles in my fics are goblin-made (and goblin magic is different from wizarding magic), making them unbreakable. Hope that clears confusion.

## Best Laid Plans

Hermione placed Titus's hair and the vial of poison on a table in front of her, twisting her fingers while she waited. They were supposed to begin another occlumency lesson, but Hermione felt it important to tell him her potential plans, since the day for action drew closer.

For days after revealing his memories to her, they'd spent their free time revelling in the gentle brush of their fingertips on each other's skin, in slow mornings staying in bed. She'd often wondered if this was what it felt like to be married, to be completely consumed by another person.

Hermione didn't want to endanger their fragile bubble of happiness, but she also didn't have the option to postpone.

When Draco finally arrived in the library and walked to the table, he glared at the objects displayed for him.

"I have a suspicion you already knew I had these." Once she'd stopped casting concealment charms months ago, Mipsy probably came across both items in the cabinet while cleaning, and Draco had been in the room when she hid the hairs.

"I did," he answered in a flat voice.

"And you weren't curious enough to ask me about them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I was waiting for you to tell me."

Hermione lowered herself into a chair across from him and picked up the vial.

"It's poison."

"*Really?* I thought it was a love potion," he deadpanned. "Though I admit I'm curious how you obtained it."

Hermione swallowed the sarcasm on the tip of her tongue. He already seemed slightly antagonistic about the surprise discussion, and she needed his full cooperation for this to work.

"I was given the poison by one of the women who dressed me for the ritual." Hermione left out Lavender's name, knowing he'd gone to school with her.

He subtly flinched at the reminder. After asking him not to occlude around her, he showed more natural expressions, though she often had to remind him to let the muscles in his face relax.

"They wanted you to kill yourself," he deduced. One of his hands bunched into a fist by his side.

"She just wanted to provide me with the option, even though I wouldn't have. Given what many of the muggleborns go through, could you blame her?"

His frown dipped further. "Why are you showing me these things?"

Hermione took a deep breath. He'd offered to help her with anything, but this pushed the boundaries of his goodwill.

"By the time suspicion has shifted from us, Julie will have given birth. Or been sold. Or possibly even be pregnant again. And I honestly don't believe there will ever be a time suspicion will shift from us. I can't stand knowing she's suffering, and I'm not waiting a second longer."

Ambient noise usually hummed in the library: birds chirping from outside the windows, the crackle of a fireplace, the buzz of charms that kept the room temperature controlled. But at the moment, everything seemed to cease. Draco's face went flat—a gradual shift. His lips froze in a sharp line, eyes dull.

"I understand, but we need to—"

"Unless you lock me in your dungeon, I'm going to help her— with or without you."

Draco slid into a seat with furrowed brows. Crookshanks hopped onto the table at the same time, rubbing his head against Draco's hand, demanding pets.

"Not now Crooks." Draco attempted to push the cat aside without success. "What are you suggesting— to help her escape? It's too dangerous."

"Not if we're smart about it."

"Merlin fuck, Granger. How many times are you going to risk yourself for other people?"

"I'd die for her."

Her cat hissed at the lack of attention and nipped Draco's hand.

"I said not now, you mangy tyrant." He broke composure and sneered. "And you—" He pointed his now wounded hand toward her. "You're not dying for *anyone*. But fine, tell me your brilliant plan."

Hermione did not like his dismissive tone one bit. She steeled herself again, knowing her next slice of information would make or break his assistance.

"Last year, I was given a note by the Order—"

Draco leapt out of his chair, the legs screeching against the hardwood as he shoved it back. He loomed over the table with narrowed eyes, fists pressed against the surface.

"*What?*"

Hermione refused to be intimidated by his stance. She sat up straighter and looked him in the eye.

"They gave me a note—somewhere to go if I could escape."

"And you wish to *escape*?" He loomed even closer, as if ready to throttle her.

"Not for me, for Julie. Stop being dramatic."

"You're not fucking going near the Order. They're terrorists. They murdered my mum! Mention going to them again, and I *will* lock you up in my dungeon."

Hermione stood and mirrored his stance, looming over the table just like him, until their lips hovered near each other. It distracted him a moment, and his eyes flicked down.

"As I've *already* stated," she said firmly. "You can either help or not. Regardless of what they are, the Order is the only place that would give refuge to a muggleborn. I'm willing to consider other options, if you can think of them."

That did the trick. A challenge. He blinked a few times and then leaned back, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm trying to be understanding— all right, what else have you planned so far?"

Hermione sat down, and Draco copied her, though he didn't seem happy about it. When Crooks resumed his quest for pets, Draco finally gave in, scratching behind his ears.

"That's where I hope to have your help." She'd acknowledged long ago that Draco was the better strategist between them. "I need to get her out during the muggleborn luncheon. It's the



only time I'm allowed around her. Blaise will make sure she's there, if only to taunt me."

Draco's eyes went to a stained glass window, as if he was arranging her ideas like puzzle pieces, fractured colours coalescing into a whole.

"They'll have several aurors at the luncheons now. Titus' orders, I suspect for safety reasons because you've been attending, and the Order attacks have increased in frequency. They've even talked about discontinuing the tradition altogether."

Hermione didn't like that.

"Katie's providing me with the castle floor plans. Perhaps I could use the poison to—"

"You'd kill for this scheme?"

Hermione shrugged. "If I had to."

She'd killed before, and she'd do it again, though she'd never done it in this way, planned and calculated.

Draco didn't seem surprised at her statement.

"Not if I can help it." He drummed his fingers once against the table. "The ministry doesn't have the resources to monitor the private floos, even for the events, but they set up modified caterwauling charms, tweaked to go off if a man exits with a muggleborn that's not bound to him. It's set in place to prevent desperate purebloods from stealing muggleborns for heirs. There's no way to—"

"Yes, which is why *you* won't be the one bringing her out— I will. All magic has loopholes."

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm *not* a man." She grinned. "It would be a muggleborn stealing a muggleborn. It wouldn't trip the charm. None of the men in charge would even suspect a *helpless* little breeder to plan something like this. They're too complacent in thinking we are too weak or ignorant to go far without getting caught."

Titus possibly would, but she left that part out.

He froze, glaring at her, and then his lips jumped into a grin before flattening again. "Clever, Granger, but we can't be sure of that theory. Not to mention, after you get her out of Flint's castle, you'd then have to navigate muggle cities and get past checkpoints."

"That's where this comes into play." She picked up the bundle of hair. "These are from Titus — a *Mediator*. It would solve both issues. I'll transform into him even before exiting the castle, just in case someone sees me. And it would be the only disguise that would make sense, because a Mediator on official business wouldn't trip the charm either. No one would even question me. I know all of his mannerisms too. And who would ever think someone like Titus would lower his guard enough for someone to steal his hair? It's the perfect camouflage."

Draco's eyes snapped to the poison, and they stayed there while drumming his fingers a second time against the hard table. "As my father taught me, every successful plan consists of distraction and illusion. People believe the easiest answers first. We'll need to provide both to pull this off. We'll also have to think of an alibi to keep you from suspicion, along with contingency plans."

Hermione tried to control her pounding heart, realising she'd actually convinced Draco to help her.

"And after the escape?" she asked, clenching the fabric of her dress to get rid of her nerves.

"You will absolutely *not* go to the Order. It's not even an option. There are already too many variables, and even if they hadn't killed my mum, I don't know their motives and can't manipulate the situation enough to be effective."

"Then where would Julie go? Because I don't think she'd survive being given to another man, no matter how benevolent."

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed a hand along his face with a groan. "There's only one other person who wants her safe—"

"Her mum," Hermione interrupted.

He gave a hesitant nod.

"My aunt is half insane, and anything involving her is risky. Three months ago, she was placed in Azkaban by Rodolphus, approved by Dolohov himself. The official reason is for attempted murder, though everyone has been quiet about the whole thing. For months, she's been... unruly about Julie. If I get her out, there's no telling what she'll do." He tilted his head, as if considering something. "But she does own a Black property that's off official records, much more secure than anything I own and unable to be accessed even by her husband or the ministry. I only know about it because my father mentioned it once. It's so secure that I can't even access it. Julie would be hidden away for life, but she'd be free of her current role."

Bellatrix had been locked away. It made sense now why she hadn't disembowelled Blaise yet. Or maybe she'd started suspecting Rodolphus, and he'd acted first.

"And you could break her out of Azkaban? I thought that was impossible."

"Nothing's impossible," he answered. "And I wouldn't just be releasing Bellatrix. I'd be releasing all of them, if I can."

"All of the prisoners?" She asked in shock.

"I'd have to. If it was just Bellatrix, Titus would connect the dots instantly. If it's *everyone*, it would look like an Order job. It would also draw most of the aurors to one place, leaving you with less scrutiny to get her out."

Hermione remembered the way the hair on the back of her neck raised any time Bellatrix dropped off Julie, as if the woman walked a razor's edge of sanity. She was only normal in her attempt to be a mum, but even that was intense and obsessive.

"So you have a plan?" she asked.

Draco's eyes flicked from her to the poison and then to the hairs for polyjuice, holding still for what felt like an eternity.

"I do."

---

Hermione wore the most comfortable dress she owned, only accompanied by the leather bracelet from Titus and her shackles. Ease of movement would be crucial for the day. She took off her earrings and set them on the vanity, knowing even something small like a diamond accidentally left on her could compromise her disguise.

Draco walked inside the room and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Let's go over the plan one more time."

Despite going over the plan down to the most miniscule detail until it became rote— and then again after that— he still hated the level of risk and let her know how much could go wrong any chance he got.

Hermione sighed in annoyance and picked up a lipstick, knowing it would look off if she didn't put any effort into her appearance, though she was too filled with nerves to do much else. She applied it while speaking.

"Forty minutes after you leave me at the luncheon, I'll capitalise on the distraction, getting Julie alone. The auror at the floo will be rendered unconscious by— well, I'm still not sure by *who*, because you're being oddly secretive about it. The person will meet me in the loo on the second floor, taking my place at the luncheon while I exit the castle."

"And after that?"

"At the same time this is happening, you'll release Bellatrix from Azkaban, through some method with a family heirloom you won't discuss in case you get caught, luring most of the aurors to there, while we take the castle floo to Bath where you've already arranged some bribes for safe passage. Bellatrix will meet me there and take Julie."

Titus might suspect her first, given their conversation at Nott manor, which meant she needed an ironclad alibi to escape the investigation. However, she was betting on him being busy with Azkaban long enough for her to drop off Julie and return before any serious questioning.

Draco gave a sharp nod. In the mirror, his eyes were lowered and darkened. "And the final step?"

"I'll contact you to make sure the aurors have finished all of their questioning. And once you give me the all clear, I'll come straight home."

To him, that was the most essential part of the plan.

*Come home.*

He'd created multiple contingency plans along the way in case things went wrong that she didn't bother reiterating, finding it tiresome to go over *everything*.

"And you still won't tell me who will take my place?"

Draco's eyes sparked with something. "Not yet."

"Why not?"

"As I've already said, you might not like my methods. But it's the best way. You had your ultimatums, and I have mine."

Hermione blew out a sharp breath and stood up. Scrunching the fabric of her skirt up, she bared her leg for his inspection. He grabbed under her knee, tugging it toward him, hands rough against her soft skin as he secured a hidden pouch to her upper thigh.

She'd created the object herself, scouring his library for the spells. Similar to her purse, the charms made it bigger than it looked. She'd added complicated disillusionment charms, keeping it invisible and unable to be felt with inspection, and after a trip to the goblins—along with a payment of a family heirloom—the charms became permanent.

Earlier that day, she'd placed several vials of polyjuice inside the confines of the invisible pouch: three with Titus' hair and two with her previous disguise as Sofia. Along with that, she'd stashed her wand, an emergency portkey to the manor, the floor plans Katie had smuggled to her earlier in the week, several extra items for contingency plans, a quill, inkpot, and a parchment that resembled the one she'd given to Dean for instant communication, except this one only connected to a copy given to Draco. Despite her pleas against dark magic, he'd sacrificed two unfortunate birds to reinforce the blood wards he'd made, making the pouch more difficult to break into, though not impossible.

The final item she'd secretly stashed away was the note from the Order, keeping it as a last resort. If Draco knew about it, he hadn't commented on it yet.

Before leaving for the luncheon, Draco dragged her closer as she craned her neck to look at him. He brushed a hand along her curls, ending mid-spine. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"I was thinking—" Hermione dipped her head down, feeling oddly embarrassed. "When I arrive back home, perhaps— well, maybe we could start trying for a baby."

She dared to glance up, finding Draco's brow furrowed.

"You don't have to—"

"I do," she said. "Don't pretend otherwise. You can prevent the investigation for a time, but it doesn't stop the inevitable. You know as well as I do that, unless there's some biological reason for me not to get pregnant right away, and if they figure out you're preventing it on purpose, they could take me away. Our time is running out. I've heard they might even watch us have sex again to ensure we are trying, and I'm not sure I can handle having an audience again—"

"I'm not getting you pregnant out of fear."

"That's the thing. I'm not as afraid as I used to be. Just like everything else, we'd navigate it together. I've grown to trust you with this too."

She pushed out any thought of dark mist or snaps or impending doom. Her choices were limited, and she needed to do whatever possible to secure her own happiness, even if it proved brief. He'd gifted her nearly a full year. Longer than a man in his position should have.

Placing a hand under her chin, he forced her gaze to his.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

A slow grin spread on his face.

"I like this plan." Draco bent down, whispering against her lips. "Now let's go get this over with, so you can return. And then I'm not letting you out of our bed until I'm certain I've fucked my baby into you."

At any other time, that statement would have filled her with dread. Instead, an odd thrill zipped down her spine at the thought, feeling more dangerous than anything she'd ever done.

"In fact," he added, giving a mischievous smirk. "I think we should practise before we go."

He picked her up and flung her onto their bed.

"But we'll be late!"

Draco dragged her hips to the edge of the mattress, pushing up her dress. "A Malfoy is never late."

---

They arrived in the great hall of Flint castle. A long mediaeval table sat in the center; the family's coat of arms decorated the walls, along with the heads of long extinct magical creatures. Like Draco had warned her about, a guard sat in a chair near the floo, picking at his nails. He barely even glanced up when they entered.

Hermione turned up her nose at the decor as an elf came and took away her cloak. "It's very —" she searched for a neutral word. "*Traditional*."

"The Flints have never refined their taste through their ages. Most of his ancestors were brutes, and they stayed brutes."

"The creature heads gave that away."

They followed the elf as it led them down corridors and up ancient stone stairwells, while she memorised the path.

When they got to the second floor, the elf opened giant double doors to what must have been an old ballroom. An iron chandelier hung over them, threatening to drop its intimidating sharp points on their heads. The heavy curtains had been opened, but the leaded glass kept the room dark, and torches flickered on the walls.

Her eyes scanned the room and then paused on someone.

"Oh Merlin." Hermione only just bit down a laugh and dug her fingernails into Draco's arm to give her control as she whispered to him. "Was that your handiwork?"

Draco gave a soft snort as they both observed Montague walking past them with a scowl on his face. Or at least, she thought it was Montague, and she was pretty sure it was a scowl. But it was hard to tell, because his nose had been transformed into a pig snout. His ears stuck up into points, floppy on the tips, skin shining a pearly pink. And when he trudged past, the tip of a curly tail peeked out of the tops of his trousers.

Montague looked up once, saw Draco, and then he put his head down and scampered off, seeming much less confident than at the first dinner when he'd drugged the punch.

"Didn't I promise to make him suffer?" Draco was unable to hide his sharp smirk. "He'd always been a vain wanker. What better way to punish him than to turn him into what he truly is."

Hermione placed her mouth against his shoulder, trying to suffocate her laughter. "How long will it last?"

"Until he crawls on all fours and squeals at one of the dinners, telling the audience that he's a loathsome little hog. I've informed him that I'll keep the curse intact until then. What I haven't told him is that it's practically permanent."

"Practically?"

"The countercurse is in my family grimoire, and I'm not a wizard who shares."

"Then what's the purpose of making him perform?"

"Because I want to see it."

The thought of Montague's shame, permanently transformed into a hog, created a pleasant buzz under her skin.

"If I'm not present to see his performance, make sure to store the memory in a pensieve."

"And would that satisfy your quest for revenge, or would you want me to do more?"

Montague deserved much more. But there was only so much Draco could do within the confines of the law, and she had bigger problems to solve.

Hermione shook her head. "You could add some hooves."

He barked out a laugh and then turned her to give a deep kiss goodbye, as if wishing to linger there forever, turning serious once again. "Don't take any unnecessary risks, because I'm close to tossing this insanity in the bin and dragging you home right now. If it seems unsafe, stay in place, and we'll try again some other time."

She gave him a reassuring kiss in return, pretending to consider what he said, while knowing that failure wasn't an option to her.

No matter what, she'd free Julie.

---

Hermione fidgeted, leg bouncing up and down. Across from her sat Zala, telling a story about one of her wild sons trying to force the elves to stage a revolt against the garden gnomes.

She saw Zala's lips moving, but she couldn't comprehend the words. The only thing she heard was her heart thumping hard. The other women laughed at the appropriate times, but Hermione focused instead on Julie, who sat in a far corner of the room with the same empty expression.

Hermione reviewed the plan in her mind to give herself comfort.

*It's almost over.* She wished she could project the thought into her friend's mind. *Soon you'll be free.*

Katie sat beside her, eyes flicking between her and Julie. One of her hands rested on the back of Hermione's chair. Katie didn't know the details of the plan, but she must sense Hermione was planning something, and was serious about following through, because she sat just as tense.

It had been thirty minutes now since the luncheon began. Most of the group had already eaten a round of tea cakes and finger sandwiches, drinking the provided tea and punch. Hermione had abstained from both, finding her stomach too unsettled to consume anything; a plate of biscuits sat untouched before her for appearances' sake.

Everything could go wrong today. Even with Draco's careful planning, the gaps were wide enough she could fall straight through and crash with a splatter. Hermione waited, knowing this next part was the trickiest part of the plan— getting Julie alone.

Step one: create a distraction and use the chaos to get Julie out.

It had seemed simple in theory, yet the logistics intimidated her. It needed to be fast, without flaws. And most importantly, without being seen.

Earlier—when she'd gotten up to get the biscuits—she'd shoved a dung bomb under the buffet tablecloth, charmed to go off at the correct time and release enough smoke to obscure their exit.

Each second she waited, a new zip of adrenaline rushed through her, knowing the time neared.

---

Three minutes before the planned distraction, something went off course.

Julie stood up, movements stiff and jerky. Hermione cursed under her breath, watching as she exited the room. Without a guardian present, an elf followed close behind.

Was she on her way to the loo? It seemed the only option, even though Hermione hadn't seen her eat or drink. But which loo would she go to? There were several, and if Hermione had to waste time chasing her down, the plan was fucked.

Not to mention, the most dangerous new obstacle— the elf.

The original plan had been to grab Julie and slip out in a cloud of smoke. If they got caught, it would look like they were just attempting to escape the foul odour.

It took everything inside Hermione to sit still, knowing she had to stick to the plan, even if this went off script. If she left the room now, she'd have to contend with a second elf following her as well as Julie's— a hard feat.

The wait turned impossible now, counting each second as it ticked away, until finally she stood up.

"Don't do it." Katie grabbed her hand before she could leave, whispering low enough the others couldn't hear. "Please, Hermione."

"I need to go to the loo," she said back in a firm voice, showing she would not be dissuaded. She gave Katie's hand a single squeeze of reassurance before prying it off. "I'll be right back."

Just as Hermione took a step toward the door, the dung bomb went off as planned. Even though she'd prepared for it, the explosion still took her by surprise. The food splattered up with a bang. Punch sprayed everywhere, along with a thick cloud of putrid smoke.

The room screamed and shouted and gagged. The elves jumped into action to begin cleaning the mess, but battling through the smoke proved fruitless. The few aurors that were in attendance began to gather the screaming women, but Hermione had already slipped out of the room, making sure no one followed her.

Past the double doors, she couldn't waste another second, needing to be quick before other aurors showed up. She sprinted down the stone stairwell, wobbling on her low heels. If the floor plans were correct, then the closest loo was just around the first corner.

But when she arrived, she discovered that it was empty like she feared.



Maybe Julie had already returned.

Or perhaps this one had been occupied, so she'd gone to a different one.

Hermione cursed again under her breath, but didn't let herself panic. Reaching under her dress, she ripped the castle plans out from the hidden pouch on her thigh. Unrolling it, she studied the floor she was on. Besides this loo, there were two others. Given the time constraints, she needed to be accurate in her guess about which one Julie had gone to.

Hermione bit her lip, only allowing herself a second of indecision. Choosing the closest one, she continued her sprint down the corridor to her right. Right in the path of the main floo, it did prove a riskier location, leaving a higher potential for discovery.

Rounding a corner, she threw herself behind a dusty tapestry— just in time as a man raced past her toward the ballroom. She caught her breath from the near miss, allowing herself to hyperventilate only a moment before continuing her journey.

At the next corner, instead of turning blindly, Hermione stopped and peeked around the edge and was immediately glad she'd taken the precaution.

Julie's elf waited outside the entrance to the loo.

Hermione hesitated. With her shackles still on, she couldn't complete any magic. And even if she could, wizards underestimated the tiny creatures. Most house elves were proficient in wandless magic and resistant to many spells, hexes, and charms, and it was hard to tell which ones would stick.

So she needed to disarm the elf without her magic.

Reaching back into her pouch, she brought out a small leather bag containing a handful of powder harvested from the thorax of the silverwing fly— the same insect she'd thrown in Titus' face during the Trials.

She'd been supposed to save it in case she needed to knock out the guard at the floo again. Once exposed to oxygen, the potency of the powder reduced dramatically. So if she used it now, she'd have to think of something else later.

But it was her only option.

Taking aim, she chucked the leather bag toward the elf, and it exploded at its feet, the powder rising in a silver haze.

The elf didn't stand a chance. The powder acted faster than normal, since Draco had added crushed fly wings to it, increasing its efficacy. Within moments, the tiny body tipped over and collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

"Sorry about that," she whispered, hating using magic against the innocent creatures. "It will only last an hour."

She slid the elf behind a nearby curtain, hiding it from prying eyes, hoping it wouldn't get in too much trouble for losing its charge.

Just then, Julie exited the loo.

Her friend's eyes widened and then dropped, as if in an attempt to ignore her. But Hermione was done with that. She grabbed Julie's shoulders and drew her into a hard hug, unable to resist the affection, even as Julie manoeuvred out of her hold.

"Hermione—" Julie's voice cracked, as if in disuse. "I can't be seen—"

"I've come to get you out of here."

She looked up then.

"Get me out? I don't understand."

"I've made a plan for your escape. Come on, follow me."

Hermione tugged gently on her arm, but Julie brushed off the hold again and shook her head.

"No."

"What do you mean no?"

"I can't. If I try and fail, he'll hurt me."

"We don't have time to debate this. You're going to have to trust me."

"I meant what I said. I've just gotten to a place where he's gotten bored with it. I—I can't go through that again. And I can't let you get into trouble for me either."

Hermione bit back her frustration. Draco had warned her that this might happen—that Julie might resist out of fear, but she had refused to believe him.

*Of course*, she would jump at the chance to leave.

Hermione had risked too much to bow to fear. Heart shattering, she made a quick decision she didn't know if she'd regret.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not going to give you the option." Hermione bent down, picking up the leather bag. The powder tended to settle fast, but the residual silver still glittered along the outside. And though the potency was reduced, it would still work well enough. Julie had been forced to sit through Finch's hours-long lectures on insects too, so she recognised the metallic shine instantly, leaning away from her.

"Don't you dare—"

Hermione blew the powder in her face, and Julie tried to slap it away.

"I need water." She lunged back into the loo, attempting to get to the sink, but Hermione followed her in and caught her around the waist before she could reach her goal, shoving the bathroom door closed behind her with her foot.

Within moments, Julie slumped forward, heavy in her hold. After being assured she was unconscious, Hermione lowered her to the floor, brushing the hair from her face tenderly. Julie looked peaceful for once, and she took a moment to appreciate having her so close, even if unconscious.

Once finished washing her hands from the residual powder, she extracted the key from her pouch and took off her shackles, rubbing her wrists from the normal ache.

Now all she could do was wait and hope that the secret conspirator had enough intelligence to check other loos.

---

A few minutes later— longer than she'd planned— four knocks echoed in the exact pattern they'd arranged.

Hermione allowed herself to experience brief relief. Since everything went off course, she'd worried about what would happen if she couldn't save Julie in the end. Terrible scenarios had played out in her mind.

Yanking open the door with her wand in hand, Hermione found a familiar face staring back at her.

"Theo!" She lunged forward out of habit, and he caught her in a tight embrace. After glancing left and right, he entered the bathroom and locked the door behind him. The shimmer of a disillusionment charm still radiated off his skin, but it had already faded.

Before she could thank Theo for helping them, he glared at her. "You and Malfoy have the absolute worst ideas. This is insane, and I'm angry he forced me into it."

"Forced?" she pulled back in confusion.

"He's blackmailing me, as always. Somehow he found a letter. One from— you know."

Harry. He'd sent Theo a letter, and somehow Draco found out about it. Communicating with a possible Order member, even in a benign way, was a serious offence. If the authorities found out, it would lead to an intense investigation, possibly imprisonment. Titus might not even be able to save him from the punishment.

She grabbed his hand, holding it to her heart to show her sincerity. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have let him do that to you, even if I needed the help."

Draco had warned her that she wouldn't like his methods. And he was right. Manipulating her brother into her schemes was definitely a low move.

Theo glared a moment longer, but he'd never been able to stay mad at her.

"I believe you." His shoulders slumped. "It's something Malfoy would do. But this—" he motioned to Julie. "I know this is all you. What if Titus—"

"I can't leave her like this. Do you even know what she's been through?"

Hermione was tired of people not caring about her friends being tortured, tired of explaining why she needed to save her.

Something crossed his face, a flash of expression. Possibly guilt.

"You're right. They bring the muggleborns to the healers when they go too far. I have nightmares about Malfoy bringing you— It's horrid and wrong." He glanced down at Julie's visibly pregnant belly. "Just promise me that you have a good plan, because this is not just theft of a muggleborn; it's theft of a muggleborn *pregnant* with a pureblood heir."

"I have a great plan, but only if I can get out of this castle. Most of the aurors are distracted right now with something else, but we're running out of time. Was the guard sufficiently knocked out?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure how powerful my stupefy was. I'm a little rusty with duelling spells. It's fortunate the castle wards have accepted me long ago, or this would have been a whole lot harder."

The caterwauling charm and the wards worked separately. Being a friend to Flint, Theo had been invited into the castle long ago, so she knew they would let him in, and there were too many people entering and exiting for Flint to realistically keep track. As long as he didn't attempt to exit with a muggleborn, he wouldn't trip the charm, leaving him safe from detection.

At the moment, the aurors were focused on the release of Bellatrix and others out of Azkaban. A prank dung bomb was lower on the priority scale. Or, at least, she hoped it would be.

Slipping his hand in his pocket, Theo pulled out his own polyjuice potion, this one infused with one of her strands of hair. "Turn around while I change."

She did as he asked to give privacy, slipping out of her dress and shoes, even her bra, glad she wore something simple. Unlatching the leather bracelet Titus gave her, she added it to the pile of clothing, along with the universal Black key.

After undressing, they exchanged clothes. Hermione buttoned up his shirt and trousers and then put on his traditional overrobe, while he took polyjuice, transforming into her before putting on her dress and flats.

The polyjuice with Titus' hair tasted bitter. She gagged while drinking, but somehow managed to swallow the sludge. Shortly after, her legs grew, her breasts shrank. Her shoulders broadened so much the seams in her robes almost began to rip, but she managed to adjust the size of Theo's clothing until it fit tailored to her new male body. After, she transfigured them by memory into a replica of Titus' auror outfit, only struggling with the

armour. She even added a shiny golden Mediator badge. If someone looked closely, they might see the details weren't perfect, but she thought she could fool the average person.

It felt strange to feel so tall and... strong. She flexed her large hands, finding it disorienting to see the familiar fingers when she looked down.

She turned to find her doppelgänger staring back at her. Despite anticipating it, the sight hurtled her back to sitting under Titus' desk. If she never again saw a copy of herself, it would be too soon.

"How does it feel to be beautiful?" she teased.

Giving a grin, he placed a hand to her chest about to say something, but then jolted when he accidentally brushed her breast. "Gross!"

"Gross? I've been told they are perfect."

Theo looked like he might be ill. "I'll pretend you never told me that. By Salazar, I hope I don't have to go to the loo while in your body. I don't think I'd recover from the trauma."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Are you sure you can effectively pretend to be me if they question you?"

"Why else do you think Draco forced *me* into this role? I just need to be annoyingly bossy, and I'll fool everyone." As if to prove his point, he placed a hand on his hip in a motion she tended to do when angry and mimicked her voice. "Honestly Theo, you need to study, or you'll stay an idiot forever!"

Hermione laughed, missing her brother.

"Your acting is superb." She hesitated. "I assume I don't have to remind you of any plans, especially if Titus is the one interviewing."

"Malfoy made me recite them in my sleep. If I am questioned, keep silent. Only talk when asked a direct question. Keep answers simple. Don't look anyone in the eye. Oh, and he'll personally torture me if I mess anything up."

Her eyes grew hot. "Thank you for doing this. I know Draco forced you, but I'm forever in your debt. I'll talk to him about the letter when I get home."

"I'd ask for a hug, but it's too strange while you look like Titus." He glanced at her wrists. "Almost forgot an important step."

Reaching down, he picked up her obsidian shackles. He glared at them before securing them on his own, right next to the leather bracelet Titus gave her.

"They're heavy," he remarked.

"More than you know."

With his eyes on his wrists, he shook his head. "Be careful, Hermione."

And then he left the room.

---

After taking out her wand and making sure everything was secured, she forced polyjuice down Julie's throat, turning her into Sofia.

When she exited the bathroom, she traversed the corridors carefully at first, Julie floating behind her. She'd wanted to be seen as Titus only as a last resort, but there were too many people to hide from.

And being caught hiding might be riskier.

Because Titus would not hide.

She made a decision to embrace the disguise, knowing his expressions enough to transform into him, walking with heavy, yet unhurried steps. Shoulders back, chin up, wand at the ready. A perpetual frown on his face.

Some of the men stopped and stared as she passed, but she didn't break her composure. Her pretend confidence must have convinced them. Even with her levitating a woman, they didn't interrogate her, continuing on their way.

When she arrived at the floo, she almost froze in horror, seeing that the guard now stood at complete attention with another auror next to him—a younger one that she recognized from a ministry trip. Even with the sleeping powder, her escape had taken too long and already garnered a sufficient auror response. Though they obviously didn't know a muggleborn was missing yet, or the security would be much worse.

One stupefy without being seen would be risky. Two would be impossible. She'd just have to bluff her way through. Mustering her courage, she walked forward as if she owned the universe.

"Stop," the man yelled as she grabbed the floo powder.

Hermione made a glacial turn, training her eyes on the young auror until the intensity made him flinch. "Is there a problem?"

"I've been commanded to interrogate everyone entering and exiting," he explained, shaking slightly.

"Commanded by *who*?" she bit out.

"Commanded by— by you." The auror seemed to be second guessing himself.

"Exactly. If I gave the order, then why would it apply to me?"

"I'm just being thorough. I thought you were at Azkaban. And who are you—"

"Are you *questioning* me?"

"No," the man said in a hurry and stepped back. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't attempt that again, or you won't like the punishment you'll receive."

"Yes, sir. Sorry sir. It won't happen again. Are there any other orders?"

"Just stay in position until everything is secured."

The man gulped and so did the previous guard. Both stepped out of the way as Hermione grabbed her floo powder.

She only hesitated a moment to see if she tripped the modified Caterwauling charm, prepared to react if it did.

But no sound erupted, and Hermione grinned, knowing she'd been right about the loophole.

Hermione whispered "The Royal Crescent" low enough they couldn't hear and disappeared into the flames.

---

Hermione stepped into an ornate sitting room. Golden wallpaper in a Damask design covered the walls. A grandfather clock rested in the corner, along with a baby grand piano and several red velvet couches. Everything old, gold, and delicate.

And completely muggle.

Compared to most muggle homes or cities she'd seen, this one wasn't in disrepair, taken care of by a wealthy muggle who had somehow wiggled out of the purges and work camps. For years, the Royal Crescent was used by travelling purebloods and ministry officials for top secret meetings.

Draco hadn't told her what he threatened the wealthy muggle with, but it must have been dire, because helping a breeder escape was one of the worst crimes. If Titus or the aurors discovered he'd helped them, death would be a mercy.

Hermione glanced around the room, knowing the man wasn't in the vicinity. And he wouldn't be. All she had to do now was sit and wait for Bellatrix to show up.

Levitating Julie to a couch, she perched in the chair next to her and waited.

---

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Until Hermione began to worry that something went wrong.

The emptiness in the room started to haunt her, making her feel oddly vulnerable. She wished she could just floo to the hidden Black property to guarantee their safety, but that wasn't possible, and besides that, she'd be eviscerated by the wards. Without Bellatrix, they were both stuck in limbo.

The time for Julie's mum to show up came and went. Hermione stared at the clock. Not wanting to frighten Julie, every time her friend began to wake, she recast a stupefy.

Nibbling on the edge of her thumb in indecision, she wasn't sure what to do. She clutched the parchment in her hand, having sent several unanswered messages to Draco.

All she could do was focus on controlling her panic and not spiral into thoughts of doom.

After waiting another hour, a few sentences appeared on the parchment. Hermione scrambled to read Draco's familiar handwriting.

***Come to the manor now! Use the portkey, if you must.***

***Are you okay? What took you so long?***

***I'm fine. It was too risky until now. But that doesn't matter. They know Julie is gone. There's a nationwide search being called. All aurors and some purebloods are being used for the hunt. And if they discover you're gone too, it will be even worse. Right now, Theo's fooled them well enough, but it's too dangerous to continue the charade. They are in the process of turning off all public floos, so you need to get home now.***

***Where's Bellatrix?***

***It was more difficult than I thought it would be to release her. And then she thought I was my father and tried to kill me, disappearing before I could explain. She's fucking insane and a lost cause. We shouldn't have counted on her.***

***What should I do with Julie?***

His answer took a few seconds, as if hesitating.

***You need to leave her behind. Do your best to perform a gentle obliviation. It shouldn't hurt too much, since it's a small memory.***

Logically, he was right. It would be foolish to bring Julie back to the manor. Titus would suspect her involvement soon and order a search of the manor. Draco didn't care about Julie. Not enough. He'd send her back to Blaise or wipe her memory, even if it went wrong and hurt her brain. Saving his own was his priority, and everyone else could suffer.

But Hermione wouldn't leave Julie behind, and she refused to attempt an obliviation, knowing she wasn't skilled enough for the delicate task. If she did as he asked, she'd hate herself forever, and she'd probably hate Draco eventually too.

There was only one option left.



*I'll come home*, she replied. *But not yet.*

She didn't wait for his response, knowing he'd try to dissuade her. She had to act fast before they shut down the floos. After taking a second vial of polyjuice, turning back into Titus, she forced one of the vials down Julie's throat, transforming her into Sofia again.

Clutching her wand and levitating a still unconscious Julie, she walked to the fireplace. Her body trembled, not knowing what would meet her on the other side. If she managed to make it through the floo, the checkpoint guard would probably be awake and ready for intruders by order of the ministry.

Without letting herself back down, she took a handful of floo powder, wand at the ready.

The location the Order sent her didn't have a floo attached. She'd checked long ago, so she'd need to arrive at the closest one.

"Nottingham council house," she yelled, and they entered the flames.

---

End Note:

I commissioned art from Ivmaruva (because she's absolutely amazing), and then she gifted me a beautiful cover art. I placed them at the bottom of chapter 1 and Chapter 30. And you can see them here [Draco carrying Hermione out of the floo](#) and here [House Pet cover art](#).

Juxtaposedmusings also gifted me a beautiful fan art that I posted at the bottom of chapter 26. You can also see it [here](#).

To combat some writer's block, I posted a rare one shot. Warning: extremely toxic Draco, but I promise to surprise you. Read if you like twisty plots. [Belladonna](#)

# Chapter 41: A Free Reeducation

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Halsey– "Gasoline"

Thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for all her hard work. And thank you to my alpha team for catching multiple mistakes!

### A Free Reeducation

Hermione stepped out of the floo into the Nottingham Council House with her wand at the ready, taking in the whole room with a quick sweep of her eyes.

Besides several broken chairs covered with a torn blue fabric, it was empty. It must have been a lovely room once upon a time, but the large windows had shattered, allowing nature to invade. Shards of glass decorated the room like confetti, as if a bomb had gone off. The wood panelling was stained and warped, and mould pockmarked the floorboards.

When Hermione tried to walk into the room, Julie floating behind her, she bounced back, encountering an invisible boundary.

She'd been too late.

The ministry had already set increased security around the fireplace. She doubted she could return, or go anywhere else, without the same thing happening. Possibly not even to the manor. During a lockdown, they had the ability to turn off private floo travel as a precaution.

Until someone arrived and let them out, they'd be trapped. Hermione touched the fabric of her trousers, knowing inside her invisible pouch she carried an emergency portkey to the master bedroom.

She could use it now.

But then where could they hide Julie without suspicion?

Her stomach twisted with worry. After a second of contemplation, she lifted her hand away, making her decision. The portkey would be the final option, only used if all else failed or if she ran out of potions. The potency of polyjuice depended on the strength of the brew. With Draco being a potion master, it would last longer than normal, but that offered no guarantees, and each batch resulted in different time frames.

Hermione attempted to break down the temporary floo hold, but the wards proved ironclad—no matter what spell she used—and she almost screamed in frustration. Like all magic, it

must have a loophole, but she didn't have time to think through it.

Because a man stalked into the room. He reminded her of a burly woodsman with dark hair, streaked with grey. A thick beard lined his jaw, and he wore old-fashioned robes. When he saw her at the fireplace, he froze.

Hermione almost cursed and edged backward into the glowing cinders behind her, recognizing the man instantly.

Travers— a Death Eater. One of the originals. He'd been at the ritual, standing under the moonlight alongside Lucius, watching with apathy. Though his first name evaded her, she'd visited his cathedral, where she'd stuck Zabini against a wall, intent on murdering him.

Hermione reined in her trepidation and straightened, reminding herself that she still resided in Titus' skin, not a muggleborn. Any hesitancy would cause suspicion.

Travers cocked his head to the side.

"Nott?" he asked. "How are you stuck in a floo? Weren't you the one to turn them off?"

Hermione had to think fast. Travers worked in the financial department at the ministry. She'd be a fool to underestimate his intelligence. "I'm transporting a prisoner. Why isn't this floo being monitored?"

Travers' eyes narrowed.

Her response wasn't her best, but there really wasn't a good explanation for why Titus Nott would be stuck in a floo barrier when he had the authority to break them down.

"This attendant had recently been assassinated by the Order. Again, *you* were the one who ordered me to check the unmanned travel points, and I thought you were still at Azkaban with the breakout. Why are you here?"

As his eyes roved over her, Hermione almost saw the gears in his brain turning. The suspicion. The unanswered questions. Too many holes poked through the story. She sensed the moment he realised she might not be who she appeared to be.

But Hermione had prepared, knowing the ward didn't prevent spells passing the barrier. While they'd spoken, she'd gathered the magic in her body—the desperation, the fear, the rage. The emotions bloomed in her. She latched onto her pain to fuel it, remembering her most vulnerable moment under the stars.

A familiar rage awoke inside her, the same blinding anger she'd experienced with Blaise. She let the monster in, knowing once she acknowledged that gnarled part of her soul, it would latch on and not let go— lacerating the deepest parts of herself in the process.

By the time he pointed his wand, she meant the dark spell more than anything in the world.

"Imperio!" This time, the dark curse came out with frightening ease, focused with her wand. A horrid dark slime latched them together. It took great effort to keep her concentration

steady as the man fought his mental imprisonment. Hermione grit her teeth, holding both the spell to levitate Julie and the unforgivable at the same time.

Casting a crucio had felt like a knife stabbing into her chest, but the imperio suffocated her, constricting her lungs, almost causing her to gasp. It took all of her internal strength not to lean over and retch.

Fractions of a second later, the fight left his body, and he transformed into her living puppet.

"Let me out of the floo," she demanded.

He obeyed, swishing his wand. The barrier dissolved, and she stepped past, the limp body of Julie following her. Travers lowered his wand again and stood off to the side, awaiting further orders.

Now free, Hermione paced the ground in front of him, prepared to face her second problem.

After the imperio faded, Travers would still remember the doppelgänger Titus. It not only would implicate her, and leave a trail of breadcrumbs, but it would also focus Titus' attention on Nottingham.

*Every successful plan consists of distraction and illusion. People believe the easiest answers first.*

The easiest answer would be another Order attack, and she only had two options to create that impression:

Kill him.

Or obliviate him.

The first would cause a giant auror investigation, especially because of his importance in the hierarchy at the ministry. Hermione also wasn't sure if she could kill in cold blood. Even someone as wretched as Travers.

The elimination of the first option left her with only one path forward.

She placed her wand at his temple, intent on being gentle enough to only cause minor confusion. Despite magical advances, anything related to memory remained a specialised skill set for those with natural aptitude, needing extensive training, patience, and a delicate touch— and Hermione embodied none of those.

But she had little choice.

"Obliviate!" The spell managed to be simple at first. Finding his last memories proved easy enough, since they'd just occurred, and the imperio made him compliant. Like she'd studied, she imagined slicing through the thoughts.

But in practice it was much more difficult than in theory. As she attempted to excise the memory, she cut too deep and shredded more than she intended— much, much more. It lifted

away with a violent rip that echoed through her own mind. His memories of this day, of yesterday, of last week, of the last month disappeared along with it. By the time Hermione managed to pull out of his mind, an entire year of his life had been erased, as if it had never happened.

Travers screamed and collapsed to the ground, clutching at his head. He seized against the dirty carpet, arching into horrific contortions of pain.

"Silencio!"

The screams ended, but Travers' pain continued as Hermione watched on, cursing under her breath. In horror, she realised that could have been Julie's fate had she attempted the same spell on her.

Travers lay in a crumpled heap at her feet. He lifted his head, blinked up at her once, and then fell unconscious.

Knowing she'd just ruined his mind forever, she swallowed her unease and exited the building as fast as she could. The sensation of a cracked egg trickled down her skin as she placed a disillusionment charm on a still sleeping Julie and herself right before she stepped out into the nearly empty streets of Nottingham.

---

Hermione hurried out of the grand government building. A hazy grey sky hovered above her, which was a stroke of luck, because sunshine might give away the shimmer of the charm.

On the off chance she might need it, she'd studied Nottingham, tracing the short routes along the main sections of the city. So she knew exactly where to go when she stepped outside, heading across the Old Market Square.

As she walked, she spotted a few people milling around, mostly muggles. As they did in London, the people kept their heads down, not speaking and intent on reaching their destination without trouble, though they seemed less subdued overall. She assumed Nottingham had aurors monitoring the city, but not with the same level of scrutiny as in London.

No matter how quiet she attempted to be, her shoes clicked against the pavement. And when they neared their destination, Julie let out a low groan, the sound amplified by the quiet. Hermione double checked that no one saw them while passing by an abandoned green city bus, rusting on the side of the street.

Bromley House Library was nondescript, made of red brick. If Hermione hadn't known to look for the old townhouse, she might have passed it by. Two storefronts rested below, though the signs had disintegrated long ago, obscuring the names. The ornate concrete door frame enticed her to enter.

Hermione chewed the edge of her thumb. If she entered as she was, the Order might attack her, thinking she was Titus. Even with the danger of being outside, it remained safer to wait

and let her disguise fade. If Draco were present, he'd recommend scoping out the area before jumping into the unknown.

So instead of entering the Bromley Library, she waited with Julie on the opposite side of the street, under an overgrown tree. Hermione spent her time watching for signs of life in the building, finding nothing to indicate the presence of either an auror, the Order, or even an ordinary person— not even a magical signature.

For all she could tell, it was a normal, muggle building, abandoned during the years of chaos and the subsequent purges. But that could be a ruse. There were many ways wizards could hide important places, from wards to fidelity charms.

Exhaustion frayed her conscious thoughts, her heavy use of magic making her want to take a nap, and her chest and head ached fiercely from using an unforgivable, but she needed to disregard her biological needs for now.

Hermione remained in place for over an hour until her polyjuice faded. The clothes engulfed her as she shrank down, and she cinched up the hems to fit, making sure her cloak remained secure, along with keeping Julie unconscious.

When she finally decided to walk to the building, she reviewed her memory of the attempted kidnapping in Knockturn alley— how sad Charlie Weasley seemed when she fought back. How condemningly Garner spoke of the system. How they promised to give her a wand and train her.

She now knew they'd been right.

But their concern didn't guarantee their benevolence. Zala carrying her bleeding child into St. Mungo's was proof of that.

The last time she'd faced off with the Order, she'd been a young teenager, scared and helpless.

But she was neither of those things now.

After renewing the spell to keep Julie unconscious, she took one last glance around, making sure no one followed her, and entered the library.

---

Despite the years of neglect, all of the windows remained intact, and it looked cleaner than many places in the muggle world, though dirt and leaves cluttered the floor. After walking inside, Hermione encountered a staircase twisting to the top. A flood of grey sunshine filtered through the skylight above, illuminating her way.

Hermione investigated the ground floor first, finding the back led out into a garden, so overgrown it reminded her of a jungle, too thick to wade through.

Wandering up the stairs, she found a treasure trove of books, smelling of dust and mildew. It had a loft and an interesting spiral staircase that would probably crack with a single step. Hermione touched the dusty spines, controlling an impulse to satisfy her curiosity, wondering

at the knowledge within. The movies she'd watched only gave brief glimpses of muggle life, much of it confusing without context. There was so much more to learn, especially when it came to history. The battles of kings and queens of the past. The average day of a peasant. The books called to her, but she moved along, keeping an eye out for anything that could be connected to the Order.

During her exploration, she happened upon a room with a metal line on the floor gleaming in the sunshine, reaching from one side of the room to the other, but was otherwise ordinary. From what she had studied, Bromley House Library was known for this meridian line, more accurate than even a sundial, used before time was standardised to help set clocks to noon.

The metal stripe near her feet made her wary, reminding her of ley lines— magical conduits, bisecting important magical historical sites. Before the widespread use of wands, ancient wizards relied on them for power, for travel, and rituals. In modern times, the use of them had fallen out of favour, since wand cores proved more reliable.

She'd studied them in fascination many times, so she knew this wasn't a ley line and she shouldn't be concerned with it. But something felt wrong, regardless. Off.

Before the wariness solidified, her eyes widened with understanding.

It seemed like a—

The floor along the line opened with a creaking groan, growing wider and wider.

"Fuck!" Hermione rarely cursed, but this was certainly the appropriate time for it. She sprang to the doorway to escape, but just like the floor, a magical barrier repelled her.

The meridian was a venus flytrap, just waiting to open and devour unsuspecting visitors. There was no way out. "Double fuck!"

The line continued to open like a hungry mouth, a dark pit emerging. Hermione hovered by the doorframe, weighing her options. As it inched toward their toes, Hermione lifted her wand, seeing that the pit had a solid stone floor just below the ground level and wasn't an endless descent.

It occurred to her that this might be what she searched for— the path to the Order.

Assured that this was the only way— that the Order was the one that lured her here and sprang this trap— Hermione relied on her courage and jumped inside, Julie's floating body following behind her.

When her feet smacked against the dusty stone, made softer by cushioning charms, the meridian line above snapped closed again, leaving them in total darkness.

---

Hermione discovered that the walls were pure stone, free of obsidian, allowing her to conjure a floating orb of lumos. With the limited light, she realised she was in a cell. Iron bars

separated her from a long, dark corridor she couldn't view. Her first instinct while being trapped was to find an escape, but she ignored it, betting on it being connected to the Order.

Tired from the day, Hermione allowed herself to rest, setting Julie's head in her lap.

It took several minutes for Julie to wake. She groaned, and Hermione smoothed down her hair with a comforting stroke.

"Master?" she asked in confusion.

Hermione withheld a shiver of disgust at the term.

"He's no longer your master."

Julie gasped, lurching upright and taking in her surroundings with wide eyes, and then looked at Hermione— as if just now realising who held her.

"Where did you— where am I?"

"You're safe," she explained.

Hermione recognized the irony of that statement while they rested in a dark cell. She understood why Julie might not believe her at first.

Julie looked in a trance. "I don't understand."

Hermione gently explained to her what had happened, where she was, and where she was going.

"The Order!" Julie cut her off. "Are you insane?"

"Maybe." She didn't feel too confident about the plan either, even though they had little choice. They lived in a fishbowl with monsters, caged in with death. Perhaps the Order were monsters too. She only had a few sentences to rely on, spoken to her by a doomed auror long ago.

Julie began to hyperventilate, placing a hand to her mouth. "I should go back before he—"

Hermione grabbed her hand, holding it tight. "You won't see him ever again."

She gave a hiccuped cry. "I don't like this—"

"Don't worry, I won't let the Order harm you. I brought failsafes, just in case."

She tapped her leg where she'd hidden the portkey and the communication parchment, along with the poison.

Not to mention she had her wand, and her wandless magic. Goblin-made obsidian was rare and expensive to obtain— possibly too expensive for the Order.



She wasn't without fangs to defend them if the need called for it. And if things did go sideways, she suspected Draco would come for her.

"I know that you'll try to protect me." Julie's eyes welled up with tears. "But I don't trust anyone besides my mum or the coven not to hurt me. Not anymore."

Hermione kissed her forehead and then gathered her in her arms. Julie was stiff at first and then melted into the touch before leaning her head down to cry in a mixture of apprehension and relief. "I wish I could take away your pain. I won't rest until I'm assured you're safe."

Julie shook her head. "I'll never be safe again."

---

Hermione didn't know how much time had passed, just that she was starting to get hungry and thirsty, stomach rumbling. So far, she didn't like the Order's methods.

It was hard to shake the thought that they might be villains. Years of treating them like the boogeyman out to steal her away from home couldn't unravel without proof.

But if her father worked for them, he must have seen some sort of purpose, even if it was also to protect her from the purebloods, correct?

She'd been fed so many stories about the Order. How they were terrorists, killing peaceful wizards and disrupting ordinary life. And in truth, she didn't know what to believe.

She used to trust Titus' judgement implicitly, and she didn't think he warned her about them with the intent to lie. She had no doubt that Titus truly believed the Order to be the enemy, just like Draco did. But since he'd betrayed her and she'd seen the disrepair of the muggle world, many of his lessons had unravelled. How many things had Titus omitted or altered to fit his world view?

While Hermione didn't trust the Order, she also didn't think they were a threat, finding her assumption rested somewhere in between malignant and benign.

So instead of panicking in their cell, she allowed herself to analyse their situation.

She'd heard of traps like this. They used to be in fashion a couple hundred years ago to catch thieves. Since then, complicated charms had replaced them, but in places that couldn't afford wards, they remained useful. She wondered how long the trap had been in existence. Probably since the inception of the building, which meant the property once belonged to a wizard.

It might have been an hour or an eternity between them falling into the trap and the first flicker of light down the dark corridor. She raised her wand, and shifted in front of Julie, intent on protecting them from the unknown person. Julie tensed and curled into a ball behind her.

As the bright dot of light floated toward them, red hair appeared first, blazing under the lit tip of a wand as a man walked into view.

A stark colour, recognizable even after several years.

After all, how could a girl forget a man who had almost kidnapped her?

"Charlie Weasley," she greeted.

He had his long hair tied up on top of his head. Colourful tattoos traced up his muscled arms — many of them showcasing dragons— only visible because he wore a top with no sleeves. Alongside the tattoos were scars and burns. Hundreds of them, crisscrossing the visible skin along his face. One cut through his eyebrow, which he raised upon hearing his name.

"No need for introductions, I see. I just knew we'd see each other again." He peered into her cell. "And you brought a friend! You'll need to move, so I can see them better."

"No. And if you scare her too much, I'll make you regret it."

"You still have as much of a bite as I remember. I'm glad they didn't stamp it out." Charlie laughed. It didn't sound antagonistic. Even though he'd almost kidnapped her as a young teenager, she didn't sense he had ill intentions. "Fine, if you don't wish to show me the person, then tell me about them."

"Her name is Julie. She's another muggleborn."

"The ward of Bellatrix?"

"Yes."

Charlie made a humming sound she found hard to interpret.

"And she was given to—"

"Blaise Zabini."

Charlie frowned ferociously. His eyes zeroed in on Hermione.

"And you were transferred from the Butcher to a Malfoy?"

"Yes."

Another hum of pity.

"Poor little doves."

Hermione didn't appreciate the implications. She wasn't a little dove, and Malfoy would never hurt her like Zabini did to Julie. But she didn't feel the need to explain her personal life to a stranger.

"So are you going to let us out?" she asked. "I thought the note was given for me to be welcomed, not treated like a criminal."

"You're rather demanding. I'll need your wand first, just in case."

Hermione wondered if he knew about her wandless magic. If not, she wasn't going to inform him. Just like with Karkaroff, it was a surprise advantage if something went wrong. They believed her to be a harmless little witch, only capable of simple spells. And she'd let them believe that until seconds before ripping out their throats.

"Very well." She outstretched her hand, offering it up, and he accioed it into his hand, studying it with interest.

"I'd heard Nott had given you this, but I almost didn't believe it. It's even more unbelievable you managed to get wands for your friends."

Heard about it? Her mind went to Ollivander—the only reliable source of that information. He must have been a part of the Order the whole time like she suspected.

Charlie opened the cell door with a tap against the bars. Hermione stood up and readied herself to attack, yet remained calm. The same couldn't be said for Julie, who whimpered behind her, clutching at her shirt like a life raft.

Charlie noticed and kept both his hands raised. "Please don't be frightened of me, love. I'm not going to hurt you. You've obviously been through some horrid shit, but you're safe with me."

It did nothing to calm Julie, and she continued to cry as he walked farther into the room.

Unable to bear the sound she made, Hermione twisted her head to soothe her friend.

But a blue spell slammed into her side, and her body froze with a petrificus totalus.

Hermione internally snarled, berating herself for letting her guard down. It was a rookie mistake on her part, but she'd been too drained from her magic use to have reacted faster. With the surprise attack, Julie gave a shout and huddled on the ground as Charlie stalked forward and snapped cold shackles around Hermione's wrists.

Obsidian. She knew it by the instant smothering feeling. Once fettered, he released the petrificus totalus, and she resisted the temptation to reach out and wallop him.

"You two-faced wanker!"

Charlie grinned and shook his head. "It's just a precaution."

He reached a hand down to help Julie stand, but her friend scrambled out of his reach, once again clinging to Hermione's back.

"She doesn't like being touched," Hermione seethed. "*Especiall*y by men."

"Right." He rubbed the back of his neck, seeming embarrassed. "That makes sense."

The mannerism reminded her of the one time she'd seen his brother— Ron. Something that reminded her of innocence. It calmed her a little.

"I thought you said we'd be safe with you?"

"You are," he shrugged his broad shoulders. "But I'm probably not safe with *you*. It seems you're forgetting, but last time I saw you, you attacked us, resulting in the death of Garner, and I've had to be on the run since."

"So is this your revenge, or what?"

"Of course not. You were just a scared kid." He glanced at her wrists. "We've known about your wandless magic for quite some time, and I managed to steal a set of Obsidian. A hard feat, I must say, since there aren't many in existence. Thought we'd have to bind you for your own good if we ever managed to rescue you. Imagine my surprise when the charm alerted me that *Hermione Granger* arrived at Bromley *willingly*."

He'd said her last name, as if that was a normal occurrence. It caused her heart to squeeze, always enjoying the sound of her full name said by another person.

Hermione didn't know why she felt betrayed by Charlie when she'd previously determined she didn't trust him. But she did. This was the organisation her father fought and died for, and the moment she'd reached out to them, they'd snapped shackles on her wrists. Perhaps they were no better than the purebloods they claimed to fight.

"I would only fight you in self-defence."

"Sorry dove, but I don't believe you. Once we get to the base, and you tell us your story, I'll release you." He glanced at Julie, who still hid her face. "Is she pregnant?"

"She is."

"It's a good thing you came to us before the birth."

She wasn't sure now if that was true or not.

---

Charlie forced Hermione in front of him and then guided her through the dark.

"Where are we?"

"Under Nottingham. There are old tunnels everywhere. All across England, in fact."

Based on the old magic humming from the walls, Hermione believed this to be hidden from muggle view. The dark corridor started out as any other, but soon the stone floors and walls transformed into packed earth. Water dripped in the distance, echoing around them. A chill zipped through the air, causing gooseflesh to erupt along her arms.

"Where are we going?"

"One of the bases. We'll decide if we need to obliviate you later."

Hermione tripped over her feet. "You'd wipe my memory?"

"Only if you see something incriminating. Last resort, I swear."

Memory alteration was one type of magic that scared her, thinking of Travers' botched obliviation. Just the thought was abhorrent. She'd rather suffer the loss of a finger than a piece of her mind. Hermione didn't wish to go with him anymore and glanced around for ideas to get away, but nothing presented itself, her mind too exhausted from the day to plan.

The walk turned gruelling. Every so often, a rat scurried across their path. The old and humid tunnels seemed to never end. She'd known they existed, of course, some dating back to the Roman occupation. The Britons had tunnelled under their enemies with magic, and over time networks spread out all over the islands, fortified against damage and flooding. Most of them now were owned by the old families, closed off to outsiders. The wards only let in heirs and guests. Anyone else risked evisceration.

And the last she'd heard, most of them were owned by Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Even with the cloying air, a chill travelled along her arm. She didn't know much about the man besides the fact he destroyed the trace before turning traitor, though she'd assumed he'd died long ago.

During the middle of the trip, Charlie tapped her head and then Julie's. The limited light vanished, leaving her in pitch black.

"What did you do with my vision?"

"It's a blindfold charm. Mandatory for all... guests. Insurance in case of capture."

It made sense, but she didn't like it; it made her feel more vulnerable. Julie wasn't crying anymore, huddling to her side. She gave a reassuring pat to her arm, pretending to be at ease with the situation. When they started walking again, Charlie's heavy hand landed on Hermione's shoulder, shepherding her through the maze of tunnels, twisting and turning, until there was no way she could keep directions straight.

An hour into the walk, Charlie turned left and tapped her head again. Her vision returned to find him still holding his lit wand. A wooden door loomed to the side, and he gave a knock on all four corners, whispering a word low enough she couldn't hear, but she thought it might be Gaelic. After it popped open, he outstretched his hand, telling her to go inside.

"Watch your step."

Despite his warning, she almost lost her balance. The floor was much lower and uneven. Charlie snorted in amusement as she righted herself, before helping Julie make her way down with a gentle hold on her elbow, even as she tried to tug away.

Once Julie cleared the obstacle, Charlie pulled his hand back as if she burned.

"I forgot, love. It was just to help you. No one will touch you here without you wanting it. And if they do, I'll deal with them myself, okay?"

Julie ducked her head and gave a sharp nod, showing she heard him.

A bright light glowed in the distance; it grew as they neared, until it flooded the tunnel. She had to give herself a few moments to adjust to the dramatic change, blinking rapidly.

When she did, she realised they were at the entrance to an ordinary room that reminded her of a ministry office, with several strangers milling around.

When they walked inside, everyone stopped talking, staring with their mouths opened. A man held a cup of tea to his lips, another paused with a stack of parchment under his arm.

Hermione assumed retrieving muggleborns was a rare occurrence, based on their expressions.

Julie whimpered at the inspection, and Hermione tucked her securely into her side.

"Is she okay?" Charlie nodded toward her friend.

"She needs to be alone, I think. This is all— overwhelming to her after what her master put her through."

It would be hard to miscategorize the look of fury on his face.

"I refuse to call them masters."

"Then what do you call them?"

"Dragon food."

He probably considered Malfoy under that category.

Being in the middle of the Order made her uneasy, mostly because she didn't know if they were any better than the rest of the purebloods.

Both organisations sought muggleborns. Hermione was taking a chance by running to them, uncertain of the treatment they'd receive.

In all the time the Order existed, had it made any significant changes? Muggleborns were still with their masters. More were taken every day. And the mist still encroached.

Did they even know about the mist?

She assumed they did.

Both sides slaughtered innocents in their way. And for what?

The thoughts infected her as Charlie led her past the men and women staring at them as if they were fascinating bugs. It made her uncomfortable, and she tried not to glare back, hating the familiar inspection.

They ended their journey outside a thick metal door. Magic pulsed off it, thrumming in the air as Charlie placed his hand in the center. It took a little longer to open than the wooden one, but eventually it unlocked.

Inside, a handsome man lounged in a chair behind a table. His booted feet were propped on the table, laces untied. His shirt gaped open to reveal his chest covered with tattoos - a giant stag in the center with lilies tied to its antlers, a black dog beside it, a moon over his heart. A solid black box hinted at a prior tattoo blacked out. His shaggy hair puffed out around his head, emphasising his dark, haunted eyes, which looked her up and down through the smoke from the cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Hermione Granger." Her name rolled off his lips as he took a drag of his cigarette. "You look like your father."

The sentence caught her off guard. She tried not to show how much the words affected her, but they carved through her.

Hermione connected the dots in her memory, finding he looked much the same. He'd sat at their kitchen table when she was a child, as her mother served him tea. Hermione had been too little to understand the conversation, but she remembered him wanting to take her away to a special place. Her father refused, and they'd argued.

Sirius Black. The man that Titus would give his left hand to capture, torture, and kill. A perpetual thorn in his side.

And here he was, casually sitting in front of her as if he wasn't one of the most wanted men in all of the United Kingdom. From what she knew, he hadn't been a part of the explosion that killed Draco's mum, but he'd taken over the organisation after, somehow lifting it from the ashes. Soldering together shattered pieces and rebuilding the Order into a viable threat.

Draco once told her that Sirius had been blasted off the Black family tree long before the curse. The picture he'd painted was of someone carefree and young.

Whatever softness he'd held in his youth had been brutally shaved away, leaving a man sharp as a razor, face like a hawk, ready to swoop down on his prey. The pattern of his wrinkles made her think of a laugh interrupted.

"You knew my father?" she asked after sputtering a bit.

"I knew you too, though you probably don't remember. You were a wee thing. Always had a question ready that I found difficult to answer. Smart for your age. Which didn't surprise me, given your father." The chair squeaked as the man shifted. "We'd created multiple plans to rescue you over the years, but it seems like, in the end, you rescued yourself."

She felt the need to explain.

"I'm only here to drop off—"

"Sit down." Both of his boots slid off the table to the floor. "And let's talk."

"What about Julie?"

"She can do what she wants."

Hermione looked at her friend and gave a wave of her hand to join her, but Julie shook her head, remaining near Charlie, who had just shut the heavy door behind him. She seemed to trust the dragon tamer more than the Order leader.

Hermione made her way over to the only available seat, facing him.

"Are you the only Order leader?" she asked, while sinking down.

"Still a wee thing with big questions, I see. But we need to stay on topic." His eyes flicked to Julie. "So... how did two muggleborns escape the clutches of their slavers? One of them *pregnant*. You would have had to get around floo barriers and checkpoints— among other things. Even armed with a wand, that would be a feat."

Hermione told her story, only including the most minimal of details. Sirius smoked while she talked, not looking away, even to stub out his cigarette on a nearby tray. She cringed at the smell, but kept going until she finished, while he stayed silent.

"That's an impressive story, but you're lying."

"I'm not."

"You want me to believe that Draco *Malfoy* helped you escape from Flint castle? Humor me with his motivation."

"Because I asked him to." When he gave a snort of disbelief, Hermione crossed her arms along her chest. "And I promised to return to him."

"Return?" She didn't think Sirius Black was often surprised, but she saw his mouth open in astonishment. He blinked a few times. "So the rumours are true."

"What rumours?"

"That you're still brainwashed."

"I'm not brainwashed. Draco cares for me."

Sirius' lips pulled back with an exaggerated frown, as if he smelled something rotten. "I was hoping you'd be as intelligent as your father, but I see you're just a little fool. He'd have been disappointed in you."

The insult stung despite her not believing it. "If that's all, I'd like to go. If I don't return like I promised Draco, he'll come for me."

Sirius gave a mocking tut of his tongue. "You aren't going anywhere."

Hermione threw a severe glance at Charlie, who was looking at her with concern.

"I thought you said I wasn't your prisoner?"

"You're not," Sirius answered for him, drawing her attention to him again.



"You have a terrible way of making guests feel welcome."

"You can think of it as an *extended* welcome, and a free... reeducation."

"Unless you plan to keep these shackles on me, I'm not staying." She raised her wrists.

"Yes, you've made it clear that you're mentally unwell, thinking you love my young cousin—a man who ritually raped you."

She flinched, but she also picked up on the fact that Sirius knew about the ritual.

"Draco was forced to do that." By his expression, he probably thought her intelligence was on par with a baby mooncalf. "If you let me go back, I could convince Draco to join the Order."

If possible, Sirius looked even more disgusted.

"I'll never allow him to join the Order."

That surprised her.

"Why not?"

"A man who trusts a son of Lucius is a fool, and unlike you, that's something that I'm not. Not to mention, I've already been told stories about him, enough to know he's exactly like the rest of them."

This man was infuriating. A thorn in her side was an apt description. He leaned back again, as if trying to figure her out. He reached in his pocket, extracted a box of cigarettes and took one out, but didn't light it.

"I really thought a girl with incessant questions would ask about her father."

Her heart lurched, and she clenched her hands on her trousers. She'd met so few people in her life that had known her parents. She wished to lunge forward and shake out the memories for herself.

"I— I do want to know about him."

Sirius grinned then, still clutching his unlit cigarette. "Did you know that Lupin found you first? Had a heightened sense of smell and claimed to be able to tell which children were magical before they showed. I thought it was a load of bollocks, but he kept tabs on you. When you had your first bout of accidental magic, I lost quite a few galleons in a betting pool." He had a ghost of a smile with this memory. "We told your parents that we'd take care of you, but your father had other ideas. Before the collapse of the muggle government, he posed as a muggle teeth healer as a cover. But really, he'd been in a secret research department developing muggle weapons— important ones—and he promised to use his skillset to create something to pass the wards."

Hermione almost leaned forward, but stopped herself from appearing too eager, knowing this information came at a cost.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I think it's necessary for you to know your history, don't you agree?"

"I suppose." The room was starting to feel like a tomb. No windows. One door. Blank walls. It reminded her of the interrogation room that Titus used. "How did he do it?"

Her father had succeeded in his promise. To this day, the purebloods didn't know how the explosive device fell through the floo during the Beltane celebration, when it had already been spelled against muggle weapons.

"Robert insisted magic must obey the laws of physics too, even if it seemed to break them. And if he could only discover *how*, he'd eventually figure out how to manipulate magic—with another wizard's help, of course. Because there needed to be a natural conduit."

It seemed impossible. Wards were connected to families. They could only be cracked with significant help from the ministry, but even then it took great effort. And the older the magic, the more volatile the repercussions became.

Mathematics had always been important to spell casting, including Arithmancy and Divination. But after studying the basics of mathematics and science, she'd concluded wizards relied too much on the magical aspect. She'd always theorised that the addition of advanced mathematics and science to a curriculum could result in magical breakthroughs.

From what she'd deduced, her father had found the equation to create magical loopholes—how to make new ones. Strong enough to render wards useless.

At that moment, something occurred to her— something almost unbelievable.

"Are you saying that my father possibly figured out a theory to break the curse?" What was the mist but a giant, volatile ward, keeping anything from entering or exiting?

"Potentially." Sirius finally lit his second cigarette. "Everything was still theoretical. He believed a certain type of ritualistic magic would work better. But we'll never know for sure now."

"Why?"

He hesitated, and Hermione had a sense that what he would say next was his real reason for finding her important to *rescue*.

"Because all of his equations and manipulation of magic, getting past charms and wards, his research and discoveries— they all vanished with his death. Which brings us back to you."

He ran his left hand through his shaggy hair, while still holding the lit cigarette in his right, even though he hadn't taken a single drag.

The real reason the Order wanted her wasn't because she was a muggleborn, or even a powerful muggleborn. Or even a muggleborn that killed Fenrir. It was because she was Hermione Granger, *the only daughter of Robert Granger*.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at. My father was a great man, but I was seven when he died. I know very little about muggle science or maths."

Sirius grinned. "Thibodeaux told me you were a magnificent student, possibly the brightest he'd ever met, even given your restricted environment. He seemed assured that you could learn enough to help, though you might not need to. We think he hid the research somewhere inside his old desk. However, the blood wards he'd placed on his desk, made with manipulated magic, have been the strongest I've ever encountered. No one has succeeded in opening the contents."

"Which wizard helped him cast the wards?"

"Lupin. He was the only wizard alive that knew your father's equations and how to apply them to magic." Sirius flinched and took a long drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly. "But he's dead too."

For the second time that day she was speechless. First, for the mention of her godfather. Second, for the assumption that she could help.

A sudden laugh burst through her lips. It didn't look as if Sirius found much humour in her response.

"I think you might be overestimating my abilities. I'm just an ordinary muggleborn."

"You also might be our only hope. After his death, we searched for any clues about how to get past his wards— which should have faded with his death— and found nothing."

They wanted her to break her father's wards. Hermione's mind snagged on an important detail Sirius danced around, and it caused her mouth to tighten in discomfort.

"But why would he hide his research from *you*?" She narrowed her eyes.

"You still like impossible questions, I see." Sirius returned her glare with one of his own, and then he leaned back, shaking his head. "We thought he'd given the information to your godfather, but it turned out to be fake, much to everyone's surprise. No one knows why he hid it all."

"What about the Death Eaters? Surely, they knew of his importance. Why kill him?"

"And keep alive a muggle that can get past their wards? They'd rather eliminate the problem. I don't think they understood the implications of what he knew. How they could have manipulated him to solve everything with you in their clutches."

"And you think I can—"

"We think the wards might be tied to his blood— and possibly yours."

Why would her father hoard the knowledge... unless it was something he didn't want anyone to know? She trusted her father's actions.

"I'm not helping you."

"No?" Sirius lost his grin.

"If my father didn't trust you, then I don't either."

"Pity. Because the only way I'll release you is if we trust each other."

Hermione let her shackles click against the table. "You're more like Titus Nott than you think."

A muscle in his jaw pulsed.

"I'm nothing like those monsters. I've never raised a child just to sell them into sexual slavery. Nor have I raped someone just to continue my family lineage. All I've done is help a foolish girl who seems to believe those actions are equivalent."

She saw the resemblance to the Blacks in his haughty stare.

"If that's your plan for me, then what will happen with Julie?"

Sirius blinked once at the change of subject.

"Everyone must work at the base, even the muggleborns. I've been told she's benefited from an education."

"Yes, but not an extensive magical one— though she does know some and has her own wand." Hermione had brought that too, tucked into her invisible pocket, and she planned to give it to Julie as soon as she was able.

"Then she can help with the little muggleborns in the primary school, teaching them to read and write. Do you think that would fit? We'll make accommodations for her when the baby arrives, and we'll frame her death as well."

Julie's patient, kind nature would be perfect for children. Hermione opened her mouth to speak.

"I'd like that, I think," Julie's soft voice spoke from the corner. "But I don't want my mum to think I've died."

"There's no choice, sweetheart." For once, Sirius looked at Julie— in a much softer way than he had with Hermione. "I know from experience my cousin can be relentless. If she thinks we have you, she'll come knocking on our door— no matter the cost to her or us."

Julie bit her lip and kept her head down.

"Can I think about it?"

"You can." His eyes snapped back to Hermione. "That leaves what I'll do with you."

"I've already told you—"

"We might need to frame your death too. Nott would be extra violent for a while, and so would the Malfoys, but it might be necessary—"

"I. Am. Not. Staying."

"Yes, I heard you. I do wish you would join us by choice. You'd be an asset to our organisation. But if not, we can't afford a traitor right now." He put out his second cigarette, even though he hadn't smoked all of it. "Now that you're here, you won't be allowed to leave our bases until you've pledged your loyalty to the cause and severed all of your previous ties, including to Draco. I'll provide a week of rest, so you can get to know other members, and see what we do. After that, I'll need you to tell me everything you know about Nott and Malfoy. Their manors, specifically. The weaknesses and fortitudes. Their elves. Every nook and cranny, including how to raid them. In return, I'll answer any other questions you want about your past and your family."

No fucking way would she do that. She kept her face like steel, glaring at him. She wasn't going to contribute to anything that would lead to Draco's capture or death.

And she wasn't staying.

As long as she had her portkey and communication parchment, she wasn't trapt. Once Hermione was assured of her friend's safety, she'd consider escape.

"Weasley, show our *guests* their accommodations. Perhaps bring them to the new base in Bristol, so they can be around members their own age. Maybe they can make a few friends."

"As my new *master* commands," Hermione bit out, standing up to follow Charlie.

"I'm glad you're finally here, Hermione. I've had many sleepless nights worrying about the wee girl with too many questions." Sirius rolled his eyes and once again placed his untied boots on the table. "But I can tell you're going to cause me trouble."

"If you don't release me, I promise I will."

Sirius gave Hermione a nod and a grin as she left the room, inviting the challenge.

---

End Note: I've been blessed by juxtaposedmusings with another fan art. I'll be placing it on the bottom of chapter 16. [Here's the Link to the Art!](#)

I've also been blessed by the smut goddess, [Ada\\_P\\_Rix](#), with a one shot! [Nadia Polyakova](#) made an amazing art to accompany it. It's a Titus/ Hermione fic, based on the events after chapter 17. This fic explores the idea of Hermione satisfying her curiosity with Titus, and the potential fallout of that. Since it's connected to House Pet, it's linked [HERE](#), but it will also always be connected to the latest chapter I post!

## Chapter 42: The Order of the Phoenix

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Prince of Egypt Soundtrack– "Through Heaven's Eyes"

Thank you to MyPrivateInsanity and my alpha group for all of their hard work on this chapter!

### The Order of the Phoenix

Hermione followed Charlie into a corridor darker and damper than the others, empty of people. Which suited her just fine. She was tired of the Order staring at them like the purebloods sometimes did— as if they were rare specimens to be studied.

"Where are we going now?" Julie whispered.

"Somewhere you can rest."

That sounded great. Hermione swayed on her feet in exhaustion.

After a minute of walking, they entered a room with nothing in it, lit by a small skylight.

"An apparition point?" she surmised. Charlie gave a nod. Rooms like these were made to be clear of some wards to protect from accidental splinching.

"I'm going to have to use side-along."

Hermione considered using her portkey now, but she wanted to see Julie settled and say goodbye first. Not to mention, without her magic, reaching into her trousers might look suspicious.

"I better arrive with all of my fingers," she warned.

Charlie gave a snort and grabbed her hand. "You remind me of my dragon." He turned to Julie. "I'm going to have to touch you again."

"I-it's okay." Julie trembled as Charlie gently grasped her wrist as if handling fragile glass.

She'd never get used to apparition. It picked her apart and shoved her back together, landing her in the center of another room, just as empty as the previous one, except much dustier. All three of them sneezed at the same time.

"As you can see, we haven't gotten around to cleaning." Charlie cast a quick dusting charm, which only sent another plume into the air. "This base is fairly new."

Underneath the city of Bristol— that's where Sirius said they were. She calculated how far they'd travelled. If something happened to her portkey, she could get inside this room and possibly apparate— maybe. When practising, she hadn't attempted to go further than a village in Wiltshire.

Hermione blinked, struggling to stay awake.

Charlie led them down another set of corridors. The network of their bases seemed extensive, and she wondered how many they had. How many members were stationed at each base?

"Where is everyone?"

"Training or out on a mission. I'll have someone give you a proper tour in the morning."

Charlie stopped abruptly and opened a door, revealing another barren room. But it wasn't for long – with a flick of his wand, two cots appeared, and with another, a door materialised on the right wall. "The loo," he explained.

Hermione walked in behind Julie, but Charlie touched her shoulder. She turned to find him leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed on his broad chest. The dragon tattooed on his arm fluttered its wings with the movement.

"I've spelled the door to attach to my wand, so just give it a tap if you need anything. And Hermione—" He sighed. "We're not your enemy, despite what you may think."

"Sure feels like it," Hermione bit out, raising her wrists.

"I know you won't believe me, but Sirius is a good man." He motioned toward her shackles. "However, I believe he can be too paranoid, and he's not perfect. He's been betrayed too many times, and he struggles to trust, but I'll talk to him about taking these off now that you're here."

"Why would you do that?"

"I don't believe in imprisoning little girls. It's one of the reasons I joined the Order in the first place."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "And if that same little girl decided to leave once you let her go?"

Under the floating orb of lumos, his explosion of freckles stood out against his pale skin. "Then I didn't do a very good job of convincing her, yeah?" He straightened. "Give us a chance. With an open mind. A solid week before flying from our nest— that's all I'll ask of you."

"And then you'd let me go?"

"Yes."

"And why should I trust you?"

He raked a hand through his red hair, pulling some red strands from its constraint, and then reached into his pocket, coming out with her wand. "Because I'm willing to give this back. I'll also pretend I searched you for other magical objects that you no doubt carry."

Hermione snatched her wand with a speed that showed she didn't trust he wouldn't rescind his offer.

She expected that to be the end of the conversation, but Charlie lingered.

"Were you honest about Malfoy?"

"That he cares for me?"

"No— about you being able to convince him to join us."

Draco had snarled at her with just the mention of the Order. Despite what she suggested to Sirius, she didn't know if she could.

"Maybe," she lied again. "But it doesn't matter because your *leader* wouldn't accept him."

Charlie considered her reply. "He might not have much choice. Sirius doesn't like to admit it, but we're hurting. We run off volunteers, and we can't match the aurors' numbers. For each one we manage to kill, five more arrive from mainland Europe and Asia— mercenaries seeking asylum from failing countries."

"The ministry hire out aurors?"

"They have to. There are only so many men in the country willing to die. Nott was the one who thought of it, and when they arrive, he ensures their loyalty to him, giving them money, or whatever they want. It's almost cult-like the way they follow him. For the past year, we've been battling a hydra, and there's no end in sight."

Speaking of Titus in cold terms made an uncomfortable prickle dance along her skin. She knew he was powerful as a Mediator, but she hadn't realised he'd amassed a following.

"What does this have to do with Draco?"

"Though I'm an admitted optimist, I'm also practical. A rebellion doesn't work if the soldiers are hungry and demoralised. We're haemorrhaging money, and if we don't find a steady source of income soon, we'll crumble without the aurors having to do a thing. A single Malfoy vault would solve a lot of problems."

Hermione bit her bottom lip at the sharp honesty, wondering if she could convince Draco to join the Order, and part with his money— or even if she would *want* him to join.



She'd always been curious about her father. And though she didn't owe the Order any loyalty, her father did die for their cause. She might never get the opportunity to explore her past again.

"I'll stay a week," she agreed. "And if you do release me, I'll honour your integrity by finding a way to give you some galleons, though I can't promise Draco's assistance."

He tapped the underside of her chin gently with the side of his finger. "Despite initial impressions, I think you'll discover that we're a good lot. Maybe you'd even like to stay." He grinned and winked at Julie, who sat on the edge of a cot. "Have a good nap, doves."

---

Hermione pushed the cots together, curling up beside Julie, who softly wept herself to sleep.

The lumpy mattresses were the worst she'd ever had the misfortune to experience. If Charlie had exchanged it with a bed of rocks, she wouldn't have noticed a difference. As cages went, she'd rather be kept in a manor.

*Julie's safe*, she reminded herself. That was all that mattered.

After waking from an indeterminable amount of sleep, she hugged her best friend close, wondering if she'd ever see her again after leaving. The thought made her chest tight, worried how she'd fare on her own.

Her mind cleared with rest, Hermione reached under her trousers and extracted the communication parchment, quill, and ink pot in her hidden pouch. After unscrolling, Hermione reviewed the two feet of messages Draco had left, all written in capital letters. Most of them were pleading and demanding. Some of them were threatening, promising to kill everyone in his way. She was glad it wasn't a howler, because it would have been screaming at her.

To her relief, it seemed Theo had managed to be convincing enough so far to fool the aurors investigating Julie's disappearance, and Draco was keeping him captive until she returned. The only danger would be if Titus came knocking, though even he might have trouble connecting the dots.

Before writing her response back, she made a hard decision.

**I'm with the Order. Julie is safe too. There's no need to worry about me. However—and don't get mad at me—I did promise to stay for a week to figure out more about my father. I'd also like to make sure Julie will be okay. After that, they'll let me leave. If not, I'll leave regardless, because they don't know about the portkey. Tell Theo I'm sorry, and that I owe him a lot for pretending to be me for so long. You'll need to come up with a cover for his job. Something where no one would want to come over unannounced—perhaps spattergroit? I'll be home soon, and then you can keep me in your bed and punish me how you wish.**

Knowing Draco would protest and possibly send another two feet of arguments, Hermione rolled up the parchment and tucked all of her items away.

Just in time.

Someone knocked on their door.

"Are you decent?" a male voice asked.

Stretching and cracking her back, she sat up with a groan. Julie remained asleep, still whimpering and twisting from a dream.

"Wake up," she gently shook her shoulder. Julie cracked an eye before startling awake with a gasp. "It's okay," Hermione soothed. "We have visitors."

Lines of worry appeared on Julie's forehead.

"Come in," Hermione called out.

Harry Potter peeked around the now opened door with flushed cheeks and messy dark hair. Another head appeared above him, showcasing freckles and red hair. Ron Weasley's blue eyes widened when he caught her stare, both of them freezing in brief shock.

"Blimey, Harry, it *is* her."

Hermione had a moment of sinking disappointment, realising Theo's suspicions had been right all along— Harry did run to the Order. She hadn't seen either of them since the Yule ball, so the physical change managed to be disconcerting. They'd both grown taller, though Ron towered above his friend.

Despite Ron's brief rudeness, their identical grins set her at ease. It felt both wrong and oddly right to finally see the man her brother loved again, and her trepidation disintegrated, sensing safety in their presence.

"Hello Hermione," Harry whispered. "I never thought I'd see you again after Theo—" He abruptly cut himself off, biting his lip. "Erm, well, I'm glad you made it here."

Theo was a sore spot for him for obvious reasons.

"It's good to see you too. Are you going to come into the room or not?"

As if something bit them, they jumped forward, scrambling inside. A girl entered behind them with white blonde hair that reached her waist, blue tinsel braided through her fine stands. She wore earrings made of ragwort weeds, and her unblinking blue eyes glanced around as if seeing something in the shadows.

"This is Luna Lovegood," Harry explained.

The last name sounded familiar. A pureblood, she suspected. She'd heard Titus mention it once before, regarding a banned publication.

"Good morning," the girl said in a serene voice, almost as soft as Julie's. "The nargles are bad in this room. You should really attempt to get rid of them."

"What are nargles?" Even with Finch's lectures, she'd never heard of them.

"No one quite knows," Harry interrupted. "We're here to take you on a tour."

She'd forgotten about that.

"This is Julie." Hermione gave a nod in her friend's direction.

Before anyone could add to the conversation, Luna walked closer to their cots and stared in a disconcerting way. "Your aura is bright yellow," she told Julie. "Much like mine."

Something was off about the girl. A disconnect from reality.

"I've always wondered what my colour would be," Julie whispered back.

Hermione placed auras in the same category as divination—which meant she considered it all hogwash. She almost said something, but Harry shook his head for her not to. It seemed the girl did this enough for it to be commonplace.

"And your aura is red." Luna turned to Hermione. "Passion and life, but anger too. If you're not careful, it can become unbalanced."

Again, Hermione found herself speechless, blinking a few times, not knowing how she should take the description.

"Be grateful you have an interesting colour," Harry broke the silence. "Mine's purple. Whatever that means."

"You know, I see her point. You have a purpleness to you." Hermione pointed to Ron. "And I bet yours is brown."

"How did you guess that?"

"Perhaps I can see auras too." She shrugged, finding it odd how easy it was to converse with them. She'd heard so many stories about the two friends from Theo, it was as if she'd always known them. "So, what's first on the agenda? I'm dying to see something besides a tunnel."

"Charlie told me to keep it a surprise."

Of course, he did.

"I don't really want to go," Julie pulled her knees to her chest.

Hermione reached out and squeezed her hand for comfort.

Harry grimaced. "I'm not sure Charlie would like for me to leave you—"

"I'll stay with you," Luna responded. "And don't worry, I don't mind silence if you don't want to talk."

"I'll stay too," Ron said.

Harry quirked an eyebrow.

"What?" Ron shrugged. "I was up all night. The last thing I want to do is walk around."

"I guess it will just be the two of us," Harry said.

"She won't like you being in here," Hermione told Ron. "So you'll have to wait outside."

"Why would I—"

"Just wait outside," Harry interrupted. A look passed between them, and Ron sighed.

"Alright, I'll um— guard the door."

Julie's shoulders slumped in relief, and Hermione stood up, showing she was ready.

---

Hermione hated the dark tunnels. Did they ever get tired of being underground? Did it start to become claustrophobic? She supposed they had no choice, but she likened it to being a mole.

Harry abruptly stopped at a closed door. "This is the first place I was ordered to show you."

She heard a soft giggle. The distinct high pitch of voices.

"Let's try not to be seen," Harry said. "Getting them to sit down is hard enough without distractions."

He cracked the door open, and Hermione looked through to find a room full of young children. A woman stood at the front, writing on the blackboard. They were in the middle of a spelling lesson, using common herbology words. Unlike the other places she'd been to in the base, someone had tried to add some cheer with paint and wallpaper. But the tables seemed rickety, and their bookshelf was sparse. The lack of funding was apparent.

"This is the primary school," Harry explained. "The older kids have a different professor. Unfortunately, we don't have enough resources for anything more, so they don't get lessons every day."

"Who are they?"

"Some of them are children of Order members." He paused. "And some of them we found."

"Found?" As soon as she spoke, her brain arrived at the correct conclusion.

Mixed along with the children of members were muggleborns— the ones the Order found before the aurors did. Hermione wondered what her life would have been like had her parents lived. Would she have sat at similar tables, taking in scraps of education? Would she have been more free, or less?

Why did her parents not stay at the base? And why did they live in a house away from protection? It might be a question only Sirius could answer.

The professor at the front had the students recite the words, and then she turned, and Hermione almost gasped out loud, recognizing her wide smile. Pretty curled hair. A familiar bow rested on the side of her head. But instead of a white robe, she wore a simple black shirt, which she'd painted with flowers, paired with a muggle skirt.

"Lavender," she breathed.

"You know her?" Harry asked. "She— oh. She used to work at the ministry."

Hermione shifted on her feet. The idea he might know about the ritual stung with embarrassment, but there wasn't anything to do about it.

There was a lot unsaid between them— Theo, his father, Titus, and her experience as a muggleborn. And she preferred it that way.

"Do you want to see what else we have?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

She closed the door before Lavender could see her peeking inside and recognize her. "What's next?"

"The training room."

By his grin, she suspected it might be his favourite place.

---

They walked toward the more populated areas of the base. Sometimes, people stared at them in a familiar, uncomfortable way. Other times, they pushed around them in the narrow corridor, intent on their destination.

But one man stopped with a wave.

"Oi, Potter!" He had freckles, sandy hair, and a thick Irish accent. "We're meeting up at the pub later. The one Murphy started in the south wing. Do you think—" he finally noticed her. "Bloody hell, is this the girl that killed the werewolf? How did you manage to finally rescue her?"

Hermione was tired of being known for that. She didn't even mean to kill Fenrir. She'd just wanted him not to touch her, and her magic enforced the sentiment. The tree just got in the way. Not that she regretted it. From all accounts, Fenrir was a terror, even to the purebloods.

Harry just nodded. "We didn't rescue her at all. She got away on her own."

"Wicked! How did you do that?"

"With intensive planning." Hermione crossed her arms, knowing she came across defensive. "And your name is?"

"Seamus Finnegan." He held out his hand, and she stared at it. Purebloods didn't tend to want to shake hands with muggleborns, and she didn't know his blood status.

But after the initial hesitation, she extended her hand.

"Welcome to our base," he greeted, shaking hard, up and down. She noticed his fingers were stained black with tiny wounds covering the callused skin. "You'll like it here. Many of us here are the same age. It's like we never left Hogwarts."

Sirius might have read her right. If anything could entice her to stay, it would be this— a communal environment. The ability to make and see friends whenever she pleased. She'd always been restricted in meeting people, and the only friends she'd been allowed had to be approved by Titus. Even with Draco, her options were limited to people of a certain social status.

"He's in our weapons manufacturing alongside the Weasley twins," Harry explained.

And just like that, the coldness returned, reminding her that this *wasn't* a school, but the center of a rebellion.

"Muggle weapons?" she asked.

"Halfway," he admitted, oblivious to her sudden chill. "We've been trying to mix muggle and magical components like—" his eyes widened. "Fucking hell, like your *father*. Still have some stock of the ones he made, but no matter what we've tried, we haven't been able to figure out how to replicate them. You don't happen to have any ideas on how he did it?"

He looked at her in earnest, as if she could pull the formula out of her pocket.

"No idea."

"Damn."

"How many explosives are left from him?"

"Not sure. They keep the good stuff in several locations, but possibly thirty. Wait— should I be talking about this with you?"

He looked to Harry for permission, but he only shrugged in return.

Did he create the explosive that almost killed Zala's child? Or was that a remnant from her father?

"Then let's pretend I didn't say anything." He glanced at her. "You're invited to the pub too. The liquor will be awful, but Murphy stole a few jugs of butterbeer for the lightweights. It's always fun."

Before she could answer, Harry shook his head. "You're forgetting about Torros and Shannon tonight."

He slapped his forehead. "You're right. Forgot all about that. Shit, I need to go tell Murphy before he gets anything ready. We'll go ahead and bring the butterbeer as a present. Thanks

for reminding me, mate." He slapped Harry's shoulder and then walked past them. "Nice to meet you, Granger."

Seamus gave a good-natured grin and a wave while going along his way.

It felt so odd to meet a stranger without the normal labels of blood status. Of course, he'd heard of her. But her reputation wasn't why he invited her to a makeshift pub. He seemed to really want to make friends. A warmth spread inside her at the idea.

Hermione didn't know how to process it, an odd ache right under her ribs, knowing this was something else she'd missed out on.

"Come on," Harry said. "We're almost there."

---

The training room walls wavered with the overuse of extension charms, scaffolding a ceiling made entirely from glass, only tempered so the sun wouldn't burn them. But it gave a nice amount of light, mimicking being outside. The claustrophobia she'd felt in the tunnels sloughed off her.

Unlike the other parts of the base, multiple groups of people hovered together in separate sections around the room. In one corner, there was a typical duelling arena with a long, raised platform and several dummies, worse for wear.

But the room wasn't just for magical endeavours. On a far wall were rows of shiny knives and other various weapons, with targets at various positions. In the center of the room—the most populated station—a skinny man and a woman with blue hair wrestled, a small crowd yelling around them. They cheered with each flip and kick, until the woman pinned the man into a position hard to escape.

Hermione curled her lip, not particularly interested in muggle forms of training, though the duelling mat enticed her. If her magic wasn't smothered, she'd give the crowd a show.

Harry led her around the room, and she stared at everything with fascination. The grunts, the sweaty smell, the shouts at each other.

"How many are from Hogwarts?"

"A few."

"Why did they join the Order?"

It made no sense why they would risk their lives having the privilege of a normal magical education and the ability to lead an average life.

"Most of them are still considered blood traitors because of their parents. It doesn't make a difference to Death Eaters, and they treat anyone beyond their exclusive group like second class citizens. Besides that, our mission here is a good one."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"To save the muggles and muggleborns."

"What about breaking the curse?"

Harry shrugged and pushed up his glasses. His hair appeared wilder than the previous time she'd seen him. "I don't know. We probably do more than the Death Eaters. I doubt they even want to break it. Why would they, when they have everything they want?"

"But the mist—"

"Mist?"

Hermione paused at Harry's perplexed expression.

"Nothing."

Hermione realised that the old guard of the Order kept their secrets too. Perhaps for the same reasons as the purebloods. Or at least, they hadn't informed Harry.

And if they hadn't, then she certainly wouldn't.

---

For the next ten minutes, Harry led her around the room and introduced her to a few people. Some of them had obviously heard about her, like Seamus. Others gave a brief nod of greeting before returning to training.

They ended the short rotation at a mock shooting range charmed to reduce noise, located next to the knives. Guns of all sizes gleamed on racks, but it didn't make sense why they bothered. Titus explained that they'd altered their body armour to deflect muggle bullets and most forms of shrapnel from their homemade bombs. They would ping off him— annoying, but harmless.

Hermione almost voiced her question, but something cold and hard pressed to her temple.

"Drop it, Maryam," Harry warned.

Hermione turned. As she did, the tip of a handgun transferred from her temple to the middle of her forehead, held by a woman with brown eyes narrowed so viciously Hermione wondered if the woman would lean forward and tear out her throat with her blunted nails.

Hermione didn't wear any charms to deflect bullets, so if the woman pulled the trigger, they'd rip through her body.

Maryam's mouth twisted into an expression rivalling a Veela, but the rest of her appearance was obscured by heavy fabric covering her hair. She wore a long-sleeved black shirt, trousers, and gloves, with a holster vest carrying several guns and knives. Only her face was exposed.

"We talked about this," Harry sounded exasperated. "Put down the gun."



Without breaking her glare, Maryam tugged the weapon away. Hermione allowed herself to relax and then decided to introduce herself, because it seemed the woman was confused.

"Well, after that, I'm not so sure a *nice to meet you* is appropriate, but I'm—"

The gun returned to her forehead, and she flinched backward. The cold metal against her skin now felt like a promise.

"You're Hermione Granger," Maryam spat. "Raised by the Butcher himself. From the intelligence I've gathered, you think of him like *family*. Others might want you here, but I don't."

"Titus isn't—"

The woman gave a sharp laugh. "Do you hear the way she says the Butcher's name, Potter? I bet she says her new master's name in that tone too. She fought her rescue once, killing Order members in the process. I don't know why we're allowing her to live."

Shame washed over her. The woman was right— she *had* fought her rescue, but how could she explain that it had felt like a kidnapping?

Well, she didn't need to explain herself to anyone.

"You don't understand anything."

"Oh, I understand." The woman stepped closer. "Your father did so much to protect you and all you've done in return is be a happy little slave."

The woman was now nose to nose with her. Harry shifted on his feet beside her, but he didn't intervene.

"Get out of my face," Hermione demanded. "What's your problem? I've done nothing to you."

"You've ruined my life."

"Who even are you?"

Maryam smirked and moved her gun a fraction, firing rapidly three times, the noise cracking close by her ears, leaving Hermione's heart in her throat. Even with muffling charms in place, her hearing rang. She forced her body to stay in place, despite her mind wanting to spring away from the threat.

After the muffled noise dissipated, Maryam reholstered her gun. "The only thing you need to know about me is that I never miss."

Hermione twisted her head and stared at the targets, each with a single bullet hole, struck perfectly in the center of the bullseye. Maryam achieved perfect accuracy even though she hadn't broken eye contact. Hermione suspected the woman would be just as deadly with the knives strapped to her chest.

"If you betray us, Granger," Maryam said in a calm voice. "The last thing you'll ever know is the kiss of my bullet as it enters your brain."

This woman was a muggle, she realised. Not knowing how to respond, Hermione held her tongue as Maryam gave her one last warning glare and stalked off.

Everyone in the room had stopped their various training to stare at the interaction. And once Maryam exited, the resulting gossip was deafening. Hermione waited until the Order members all returned to their activities before twisting toward Harry, who examined the targets with a frown.

"Muggles are allowed to fight?" she asked.

"Not many, but Maryam is enough of a threat that she's on the wanted lists that Nott created. She's aware of her disadvantages as a muggle, but it doesn't stop her. Right now, bringing her in alive would be worth 5,000 galleons. Bringing her in dead would be 2,000."

Hermione gasped at the amount. It was a minor fortune and had to be funded by Titus.

"But why?"

"She wasn't bragging. Maryam's a prodigy with accuracy. She's relentless in her hunts, and when she does decide to shoot, she doesn't miss her mark. So far she's killed ten higher ranking aurors, including Titus' third in command. Her biggest drawback is that she's limited by bullets, needing the charmed ones your father created to use against the aurors, which are in short supply. Only five left, from what I know. And each one is named after a wizard she hates. Right now, she's focusing on the mercenaries, because their cheap armour is easier to get around with normal bullets."

She didn't have to ask to know Dolohov and Titus each had their own named charmed bullet.

"Why does she hate me so much?"

Her icy glare had been deeply personal.

"Her little sister was a muggleborn. When the purebloods came, her father and brothers attempted to fight back. Titus killed all of them. Besides her sister, Maryam was the only survivor of the massacre, only spared due to her being a minor."

"That's terrible, but I didn't—"

"When she later joined the Order, Garner helped her in improving her accuracy. She looked up to him like a father for the short time she knew him before—" he didn't finish, but he didn't have to.

Garner was the auror who she'd petrified as a teenager. Later, he'd been tortured and killed by Titus, though she didn't know all the details.

"Oh," Hermione understood now. The anger made sense.

Harry patted her shoulder in sympathy.

---

When Harry brought Hermione back to her room, Julie seemed in better spirits. As if something heavy lifted for a moment. Hermione didn't pry, but she was curious as to what they'd talked about.

In their absence, Ron had scrounged a platter of bread, fruit, and cheese, which they split equally, eating ravenously.

"The pub will be closed tonight, because there's a wedding," Harry explained after finishing. "I debated on bringing you, since you're new, but it might be a good chance for you to meet people and have some fun."

A wedding! She'd never in her life experienced that. Most purebloods didn't have marriages anymore. Or if they did, the ceremonies were small affairs.

"I don't have anything to wear." Hermione still had on Theo's clothes from the escape, the fabric wrinkled from sleep. At least Julie might be appropriate for the occasion in her conservative dress.

"Your trousers are nicer than what most will wear."

"Really?" Hermione looked down at her clothes in confusion.

"Would you like to go?" Harry asked Julie.

On instinct, Julie ducked her head, but unlike earlier, she gave a surprising nod.

"Then I'll come back in a few hours."

---

Later in the evening, Harry retrieved them and took them back to the training room, which had been transformed. Hermione tugged on her clothes, self-conscious that she didn't have the resources to take a shower yet. Harry had magically removed the wrinkles from her clothing, and cleaned her hair, skin, and teeth with charms, but he didn't know any to tame her hair, so it remained in a cloud of frizz around her head. Julie looked much nicer than her, blushing shyly at the people they encountered on the way.

When they entered, moonlight glowed down through the glass above. The room still stank faintly of sweat. Replacing the wrestling mat in the center, folding chairs flanked a long, white rug. It led to a raised platform, with an arch of flowers. Extra greenery sprouted along the aisles and wavering walls, giving off the vibe of a meadow in the springtime. They'd even charmed faux fairy sprites to zoom in and out, reminding her of the hedge mazes on the Nott grounds. And like the mazes, there were several statutes decorating the area. Only cheap illusions, based on the shimmer surrounding them.

Behind the platform were tables and chairs, and a whole network of flowers and vines sprouting over the area.

Used to decadence, she'd grown immune to the effects of magic when it came to party decorations. But it was still lovely. A lot of thought and planning had gone into the day. And though it also looked like it had been done on a severe budget, it held a charm that would be hard to replicate.

As they walked into the room, soft music flowed around her. Julie's death grip on her arm loosened.

After depositing them in chairs toward the back, Harry went to the front, sitting beside Sirius Black, who wore a surprisingly nice suit, though the front still gaped open. Neither Charlie nor Maryam ever appeared, but she recognized several others from previous introductions as the guests entered.

The groom shifted nervously under the arch of flowers. He clutched his hands at his spine and rocked on his heels.

She'd never seen the man before, and Hermione watched in fascination as people filtered inside the room, taking their seats and talking. Many of them gave her furtive glances – but none of them for too long.

Envy lanced through her, seeing them partake in easy conversations.

No one wore specific colours to delineate them. No mistresses. Or wives. Or breeders. No purebloods. Or halfbloods. Or muggleborns. The labels didn't matter here.

"It's beautiful." Julie glanced up at the moonlight. "I can't believe we're at a real wedding. I used to dream that I'd—" she stopped, and Hermione grimaced. Julie had always been more of a romantic than Hermione, hoping for love and babies and promises of forever.

Instead of love, Julie had received pain. Instead of a promise of forever, she'd only been given violence.

You're safe now, she wished to whisper. But perhaps she knew, because Julie's hand cradled the small bump on her stomach as they waited.

Soon enough, the wedding began. The soft music played louder, the pleasant sound echoing in the room as the door opened, and the groom straightened. A woman appeared with a lace veil and a pretty white dress— cotton not silk, and the lace on the veil appeared old and stained. The woman beamed under the veil and walked down the aisle, clutching a small bouquet of flowers.

Hermione would never have this. The realisation swooped low in her stomach in a rush of painful understanding.

Draco may treat her as a bride, but it would never be real. And though she'd always attempted to be practical, something inside her raged at the unfairness.

The rest of the wedding passed in a blur of repressed loathing, wishing she could be happy for the bride, hating she imagined herself walking toward Draco in the rose garden under a

full moon. He'd probably give her a sly grin as she approached—the one he wore when he won something difficult. He'd act confident, but when they spoke their vows, his voice would crack once with emotion. She saw it clearly— Draco capturing her lips in a searing kiss.

She felt so sick she could vomit, knowing the white of her robe at the ritual had been an intentional nod to this. If Draco hadn't intervened, she would have been drugged, stripped naked, and raped with an audience on what would have been a mockery of a wedding night.

The injustice of what she'd endured never seemed so apparent as when both the bride and groom walked back down the aisle, holding hands in triumph as the crowd surged to their feet with cheers.

---

The party started soon after.

"Thanks," Hermione said when Harry gave her a bowl of watery soup, while leading her to a seat at a table.

"It's not much."

Harry had been raised with his own generational wealth. She wondered if he had access to the vaults, or if Severus somehow blocked it. The goblins normally ignored the politics of the wizarding world, but going to Gringotts as a known Order member would be suicide, regardless.

"It's great," Hermione lied while taking a spoonful and trying not to grimace at the lack of flavour. She doubted they had kitchen elves stashed away.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "Alright, enjoy yourself. I'll be back around later."

He walked away, leaving them alone. Julie ate her food, already looking healthier, colour flooding her cheeks. Even in normal circumstances, she was shy, so this might be too much for her. But she ate without complaint and watched the people.

After a meagre slice of dry cake, the music began again, much livelier than before. The light dimmed, leaving only the moonlight, some lanterns, and the faux fairy sprites as the groom spun the bride around the room.

If she concentrated, she could imagine it as a summer party in the gardens, interrupted only when Seamus walked toward them.

"Who's your friend?" he asked.

"Her name is Julie. Another muggleborn. She escaped with me."

At the introduction, Julie glanced back down at her feet.

Seamus grinned. "Would you like to dance?"

Julie stilled, wringing her hands.

Hermione felt instantly protective. "She might not want—"

"I would," Julie whispered.

Hermione looked at her in shock. "What?"

"I've never danced before, and I've always wanted to, but I— I just don't want to touch."

"No touching." Seamus ran his hand along his chest with a promise. "Cross my heart."

Julie stood and straightened her dress, showing off her bump. Seamus' eyes stuck on it for a moment in surprise, but then he shook his head, grinned, and almost reached out to take her hand. Remembering at the last second, he dropped his arm. "Follow me!"

Julie shivered as she made her way to the dance floor, joining the group of young Order members in the center. Julie didn't do much but sway as Seamus began to move in exaggerated contortions, which made Julie smile and glance away.

Harry was there too, twirling a woman with short purple hair— the same woman who'd been wrestling in the training room. Luna moved beside them in her own world, wiggling her arms and stomping her feet as if gesticulating to the moon. She wore a flower crown with added pine cones and bells. And as she passed by, she could swear she saw dirigible plums attached to her earlobes.

"Join us!" Ron shouted at Hermione, dancing next to a girl with the Weasley hair as the tempo increased — his sister, she assumed based on how much she looked like him.

The whole day she'd felt like some odd outsider, intruding on a moment not meant for her, but the outstretch of welcome almost made her stand up.

But it was interrupted by Sirius Black sliding into the seat beside her.

She tensed as he leaned back in the chair and reached inside his pocket, coming out with a cigarette case.

"I've been trying to quit," he said.

"Why bother?"

He stared at the case without reaching inside it. "These things can kill you."

Hermione surprised herself by laughing at the thought of worrying about the effects of cigarettes in the world they lived in, and he grinned. She found him very handsome when he did that, his eyes less haunted.

"I thought you should know that Draco Malfoy contacted me."

"He did what?" Hermione turned her body in surprise.

"We found a letter at Bromley house addressed to me." Sirius fidgeted with the cigarette case, turning it in his palm. "Like a typical Malfoy, he began with bribes, explaining how much money he could give for your safe return. And then—like a typical Malfoy—he ended with threats, saying if we refused to hand you over, he'd rout us out like rats and wouldn't stop until he'd killed every last one of us."

"I wouldn't underestimate him," Hermione warned. "The last person to do so was Titus."

Sirius gave a nod in her direction. "I believe he'll try to do as he says, and I also now believe that he cares for you in his own warped way based on how he talked about you."

"So will you give me back?"

"That might not be the ethical choice, but it's the smart one. We're... in dire need of allies, and I might have to take the risk."

They sat in silence, until Hermione couldn't stand it.

"Why did my father not live on base?"

He sighed and placed his cigarettes back inside his coat pocket. "He wanted you to have a normal life. As much as possible, at least. He knew he'd have to move you here eventually, but we granted him a secret keeper. A person I thought I trusted."

"Who?"

"That's a sad story for another time. Tonight there's a party, and you're young and deserve to be so. Give me your wrists."

"What?"

He held out his wand. "Your wrists. Like you, I can be a stubborn fool too, but Charlie made a few good points."

She let him take off the obsidian, watching them fall away. She could curse him now, but she wouldn't.

"Your insistence to leave made me angry. For a moment, I'd forgotten why I fight in the first place. Charlie's right, I can't force anyone to be here, even if I think they're making a foolish choice."

She knew this was hard for him. "I won't betray you. If I go back to Draco, I really will discuss the option of joining."

He hummed noncommittally, though it sounded cynical.

"I only want one thing from you." He turned his head, finally staring at her, eyes once again haunted. "Go see the muggles. Watch how the purebloods treat your brethren. I want you to see everything for what it truly is. After that, you can make a fully informed choice."

She wondered at the dark tone in his voice, suggesting horror. It couldn't be worse than muggle London, right? Poverty and desperation. She gave a sharp nod in agreement, which seemed to satisfy him, because he leaned back, throwing the obsidian on the table.

As if he couldn't help himself, he once again reached for a cigarette, this time pulling one from the box.

"Go join them," he said, lighting it. "Be a normal kid for once."

This time she did as he said, heart beating fast as she walked up to Julie. Her friend's face was flushed as Hermione with a happy shriek. Luna walked beside them giving erratic wiggles of her arms, and they both laughed at the same time, clutching each other, sides hurting.

Friends— that was what she'd been missing.

When they broke out the butterbeer, passing around the jug, the pain of loss under her ribs faded. The trauma evaporated with the pulse of music. The worries and the fear floated away with the movement of bodies. And the horror of the world outside silenced, if only for a single night.

Under the light of enduring stars, Hermione remembered what it felt like to be just an ordinary girl, having fun.

---

**Author's note:** I've been blessed by House Pet readers again!

A beautiful fan art of Hermione made by [highreeve2020](#) is featured at the bottom of chapter 17.

Another (wonderfully gruesome) fan art made by [Frau Blucher](#) is featured on the bottom of Chapter 35.

pandacorn0312 also wrote a fun Titus AU called You're Toxic, I'm slipping under (linked below). As with any fic attached to the fic, it will always be linked at the bottom on the most recent chapter! Go check them out!



# Chapter 43: The Rotten Truth

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion : J. Cole- “She Knows” (slowed + reverb)

Gentle Reminder: House Pet is almost Dead Dove, meaning that it contains disturbing content, but it doesn't quite meet the requirements of Dead Dove (to me). This chapter is a turning point for the story, and the content from here will be dark until the end (though it won't be unrelenting). Please review tags.

Trigger warnings below:

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

## The Rotten Truth

“I think I’d rather pet an acromantula.” Hermione eyed the glass of firewhisky in complete loathing.

Harry clutched his own vial of alcoholic poison besides her. “It’s tradition to send off the new recruits this way, but we can find some butterbeer if you’d like that better.”

The cool air of the makeshift pub made her tighten her borrowed cardigan around her shoulders. Across the table, Ginny— Ron’s sister—was in the process of pouring more drinks, and Tonks, the woman with purple hair from the Training room, was in the middle of singing the Hogwarts anthem with the infamous Weasley twins— all of them completely sloshed.

It had been three days since they’d arrived, and Sirius already planned to send Julie to their base in Scotland by the end of the week, along with Lavender and most of the children. He’d allotted them time to recuperate, but that would end soon. They’d fake Julie’s death within a few days, making her decision permanent.

Hermione might need the liquid courage to release her friend.

She glanced sideways at Julie, who sipped on a glass of apple cider as she talked softly to Seamus.

“All right.” Hermione raised her glass, and the others at the table cheered, following her lead. In synchronisation, everyone swallowed and grimaced. Hermione coughed, and Ron pounded on the middle of her back. The room gave raucous shouts and high fives. A little over the top, but Hermione grinned at the good-natured fun and wiped her lips.

“I’ll drink as well.” Julie surprised everyone by finishing off her apple cider with a single gulp.

Seamus gave a loud whoop of excitement, grabbing her wrist and lifting it into the air in celebration.

“Oh fuck, sorry Juls.” He dropped her wrist like fire, just as Charlie seized Seamus’s shoulders, lifted him bodily into the air, and set him aside.

“You’re in timeout, Finnegan,” Charlie warned, taking Seamus’ seat. “You okay, dove?”

“I’m fine,” Julie whispered back, cheeks stained pink. “I know he didn’t mean it.”

Under the table, Hermione grasped Julie’s hand, trying to reassure her that everything would be all right, even if the day they needed to separate drew near.

---

“I can’t leave you!” Julie clutched Hermione tight in their shared beds after leaving the pub. “And I can’t bear my mum thinking I’ve died.”

Since her rescue, Julie had been stoic to an unhealthy degree. Besides crying in her sleep, she showed little emotion. But as the hours approached closer to her journey, Julie cracked a little more until she fractured into pieces.

“He’s going to find me. I can’t survive it a second time.”

Hermione cradled her like a child as she sobbed so hard she was gasping for breath. Earlier in the day, she’d slipped Julie’s wand under her pillow, preparing for the inevitable separation. It comforted Hermione to know she’d at least have her magic.

“He won’t,” Hermione whispered, throat tightening. “You’re going to go north and heal. You’ll make new friends, and soon you’ll be a mum like you’ve always wanted.”

Julie pulled back, leaving wet blotches on Hermione’s shirt. “I don’t know if I can do that either. I never really planned to be its mum. And now— what if I never love it? What if I resent it?”

“Nothing you feel in this situation could be wrong,” Hermione grabbed both her hands. “But this baby isn’t his. It’s *completely yours*. Nothing of you belongs to him.”

Julie brushed her hand along her bump. “I just— I wish I had my mum.”

“I know you do.”

“I also wish I had its godmother there to help me. I don’t know if I trust anyone else in this entire world.”

“Godmother!”

Julie gave a sad smile. “I hope it’s a girl, so I can name her Hermione.”

“Don’t you dare. It’s unwieldy and impossible to shorten! I don’t know what my parents were thinking.”

Julie gave a sharp laugh and wiped her eyes. “It’s my favourite.”

“What if it’s a boy?”

“Herm.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, they both laughed. She stored the sound in the deepest parts of her soul—a place no one could steal it.

“I’m going to miss you,” Hermione said.

“Every day of my life. I can never repay you for what you’ve done.”

---

The next day, Hermione attempted to twist her body around her opponent in the training room, but she miscalculated and smacked into the sweaty mat. After that, Charlie Weasley quickly folded her into a pretzel.

“You’re pathetic,” he teased, looming over her, keeping her pinned down in a tight hold. “Our third years could beat you.”

It wasn’t her fault that she’d never physically trained like this. So far today, she’d lost ten matches, each more embarrassing than the last. The crowd around them had thinned after the first two when she showed she wasn’t much of a challenge. Maryam had watched at first, before rolling her eyes and walking away.

She couldn’t wait to challenge them to a duel and make them eat their words.

A deadly seriousness lurked under the surface of the people training around her. A thrum of tension in the throw of a knife, in the point of the wand. They might be normal young adults in the pub, but in the training room, they were recruits for a rebellion.

Despite not initially being interested in combat, Hermione admired the physicality—the ability to use leverage and pressure points to manoeuvre people. Grappling remained an essential skill even to wizards. Without wands, they’d still need to defeat opponents. She’d watched Titus push his body to the limit in training, using magical dummies to increase the challenges.

“Tap out,” Charlie demanded.

“Never.”

He twisted her arm down in a painful position. “Too bad. I’m ready to go.”

This time her body relented, even though her mind wished to fight. She slapped the mat below her in frustration. Hermione’s sweat dripped down her neck, and she was sure she smelled like a dirty sock, muscles burning and bones aching.

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Are you always this stubborn? I nearly had to break your arm for you to listen to me.”

“Nearly always.”

“Good. You’ll need some fight in you. Though sometimes a person must retreat or concede defeat a time or two. It’s wise to take the appropriate route. We only fight to the death if there’s no other choice.”

He stood up and reached down his hand. Her pride stung, so she almost swatted the offered help away, but she swallowed her frustration and let him pull her to standing. Then he patted her shoulder. “I have something to show you.”

---

Charlie led her down a tunnel that went deep into the earth, coming out into a cavern.

It smelled of sulphur and dung, and the heat hurt her skin, hair crackling with volatile magic and an instinct of danger.

A growl rumbled from the dark depths of the cavern, and a red glow illuminated a giant snout in the dark.

“Get behind me,” Charlie said.

She listened, positioning herself to only peek around his body as a Hungarian Horntail emerged from the shadows.

The black scaled dragon huffed, showcasing teeth the size of her arm. Yellow eyes assessed her, brimming with intelligence.

Dragons were sentient, but not in the same way as Centaurs. They viewed wizards as food, unable to control their high prey drive. On the rare occasion they did bond, it tended to be with a single wizard, whom they could speak to telepathically.

Bonding was dangerous, and many dragon riders were eaten or burned in the process. Only four out of ten were successful.

“This is Etelka. Isn’t she a beauty?” The dragon moved close enough that Hermione could see striation on her shiny scales, and she resisted the urge to back away, knowing it might activate its aggression.

“Terrifying is a better word.”

The dragon snorted, sending out a cloud of hot air that sizzled the ends of her hair.

“She liked that.” Charlie scratched her snout. Unbelievably, the dragon rubbed against his hand like a puppy, though Hermione would be a fool to attempt the same.

“She can understand me?”

“For the most part.”

“Did you build this room for her?”

“I did.” He scratched along her jaw, close to her fierce teeth. “She needed somewhere to stay and doesn’t like to be far from me since we’re bonded. Though sometimes she joins her pack up north for days or weeks at a time. I don’t keep her leashed.”

“A pack leader?”

“The matriarch of a wild one. If you value your life, you shouldn’t go near the others. Even I remain wary, though her hatchling sometimes tolerates my presence, since I helped raise her.”

Hermione had as much desire to ride a dragon as ride a broom, maybe even less so. She respected their intelligence and power enough to keep a healthy distance, whether wild or bonded.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“I needed somewhere private to give you these, and no one is stupid enough to enter this room.”

The dragon gave another rumble of a growl and lumbered to the edge of the cavern to curl up on the stone floors. Charlie extracted a bundle of scrolls from his cloak and handed them to Hermione.

“This is what little information we’ve compiled that the Order has on your father, including some written memories of some of his conversations. Your mother too. Sirius is willing to let you view his memories, if you wish, though we need to find a pensieve.”

Hermione blinked at the scrolls, eyes burning with emotion, wondering at the contents.

“Thank you.”

“Sadly, it’s not for free. Harry’s going to bring you to your father’s desk today. We need to try and open it.”

“I’ve already told you that I’m not helping you with that.”

Charlie ran a hand through his unbound hair, a common tic of his. “Sirius said that might still be your answer, and I get it. You don’t trust us yet, but this is the only way. We need this, Hermione. We’ll lose without some sort of break.”

Hermione nibbled her lip in thought, unsure what to do. A part of her wanted to unravel her father’s mysteries too, and the only place might be in that desk. Charlie was right— she didn’t trust him, but she also didn’t think he held ill will either.

“Could you go with me?”

“I have a mission, dove. We need to clear out a base in the west and relocate everyone, because the wards around it are failing.”

“Alright, I’ll do it.”

Charlie’s shoulders sagged in relief, and his dragon gave a snort of fire in the corner.

---

Five minutes later, long after Charlie and his dragon left and she’d stashed away her father’s documents, something rustled near her. As she turned her head, Harry tugged off his invisibility cloak, revealing his messy hair and glasses, shifting in his perpetually awkward way.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I suppose.”

---

The Order tunnels went on forever, dark and damp and as suffocating as normal, filled with small spiders and roaches that made her shiver each time they crawled across her boots. The sooner she got out the better.

“Where exactly are we going?” She asked.

“To an abandoned base. It’s not too far.”

They’d fallen into silence, and the things unsaid between them bubbled to the surface, peeking out every time he stole a glance at her. Each distant crawl of a rat or drip of water only amplified the heavy barrier.

“You can ask me about him,” she said.

Theo— the main topic they danced around. The thing that bound them together.

“I’m not sure what to ask. I’m not even sure I *want* to know.”

“Yes, you do,” she said. “He’s training to be a healer.”

Harry curled his shoulders forward, as if the knowledge pressed against him. “I always thought he’d be great at healing.”

Hermione hesitated, staring at his back in the dim light. “He still loves you.”

“I’ve always cared for him,” he said and then hesitated. “He wanted more from me, but I—I don’t know. I always knew things would separate us. His brother—” He sucked in a breath. “It was never meant to work.”

She understood. Love wasn’t enough. It didn’t always overcome the obstacles or the differences. Sometimes paths diverged.

Before she could offer any more information, he lifted his lit wand to a wooden door. “It’s here.”

---

Empty, ransacked places always sent a chill down her spine. There was a melancholy attached to the stale molecules.

These tunnels had once been full of life. A busy center of activity. Her father walked these halls. Met people long dead, leaving only silence behind.

They walked through the abandoned rooms of the old base as Harry explained that it had been infiltrated by the aurors around the same time her father had been killed. The main wards had failed, because someone betrayed them. Most of the Order members fled and relocated.

But many people also died, right here in the tunnels, their blood congealed and dried where she now stepped.

Now only the ghosts remained, whispering warnings in the dark.

“The aurors used to monitor this place, but they don’t bother anymore,” Harry continued. “I’m not sure if they knew your father’s research was here.”

That didn’t make her feel better. She didn’t like to be in this enclosed tomb.

The final room they entered had been more ransacked than the others: rotting books strewn about, furniture upended, glass shattered, scorch marks along the wall.

The only thing untouched was a simple metal desk. With Harry’s lumos hovering above, the shiny surface gleamed in its lonesome corner absent of any decoration.

“Is this it?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.”

Hermione walked closer, running her hand along the cold metal of the top. So ordinary and unassuming. Yet, it contained inflammatory secrets. Things that could bolster the rebellion. Everything her father worked for was trapped in a single place. From the looks of the room, people had already attempted to crack into it.

“What if I find something I don’t feel like sharing?” she asked.

Harry looked thoughtful. "If you think the contents are too dangerous, then I'll pretend we didn't find anything."

Sirius wouldn't approve of that decision.

Hermione stared at the desk, wondering what to do. But her curiosity guided her. She wanted to know her parents beyond the brief memories she had of them rocking her to sleep or singing "Happy Birthday."

There were four drawers on the sides, and a long skinny one in the center. She placed her hand on the middle handle. Taking a deep breath, she tugged.

Nothing happened.

She tugged again.

"It's locked," Hermione said, finally noticing the slight notch on the side of the metal handle. "I think it needs a key."

She performed an alohomora, but it stayed sealed. Then she attempted to open all of the other drawers. They didn't budge either, and the wards glowed red with the tampering.

Hermione backed away, unwilling to test it further. "I can't open it."

Harry pushed up his glasses and tilted his head to the side. "Maybe you're right about the key."

"But where would my father hide one?"

"Sirius is going to be disappointed. They put a lot of hope in this, but it's just another dead end."

Hermione was disappointed too. Why would her father hide his work from the Order? It bothered her like a splinter under her skin. As if she was missing something important right under her nose. But no matter how many stones she turned in her mind, nothing revealed itself.

"Let's go back," Hermione said.

Harry shuffled his feet. "Sirius ordered me to show you the muggles today. He said after that, he'll allow you to leave when you want, as long as you let him obliviate information about base locations."

Hermione didn't like the thought of obliviation, remembering the way Travers convulsed and collapsed in agony, but she also didn't feel like arguing about it right now.

"How will we get to the muggles?"

"The place he wants me to show you is only a short broom ride from here."



Hermione curled her lip in disgust. “Why must it always be broom travel?”

---

Despite her terror, Harry was a natural at flying, though she still clutched onto his back with the invisibility cloak wrapped tight around them both, and a disillusionment charm on their broom and feet so as not to be seen.

She closed her eyes until they touched down. Finally safe, with her feet firmly on Earth, she let herself examine where they landed.

A formidable wall reached up to the sky in front of her, brick at the base to a man’s height, then tall metal panels, topped with razor wire and stretching as far as she could see on both sides. Solid metal gates provided entry.

“Where are we?” She whispered to Harry, standing under the cloak beside her.

“They call this one the South camp. I believe they have five now.”

She remembered the mention of them before attending Goyle’s party. Titus had assured her that the workers were volunteers and compensated.

Her stomach turned as a tight sensation enveloped her chest.

Hermione tried to glance past the small cracks in the metal panels, standing on her tiptoes, but she couldn’t see much from her vantage point.

“Let’s go inside,” Harry said.

“Inside? Are you mad? Don’t they have wards?”

Harry shook his head. “They don’t have the resources for real wards. The walls are charmed with caterwauling charms, but it’s built for muggles. All we need to do is wait for someone to enter the main gate, and then we’ll slip inside.”

“But we’ll get caught.”

“I’ve done this several times.”

She didn’t feel that great about the situation, but she did promise Sirius, and she trusted Harry.

---

The entrance consisted of heavy double gates, showcasing the same lethal spiked wire lining the top.

“Hold still, someone’s coming,” Harry said after thirty minutes of waiting.

They huddled under the cloak as a wizard with an eyepatch entered into view on horseback with three women floating behind him, all petrified in contorted shapes. It looked as if they’d been frozen while running.

“Who is that?” Hermione whispered under the heavy fabric, listening to the clop of hooves get closer.

“A bounty hunter,” Harry answered. “There are several that are loosely employed by the ministry.”

“Why is he transferring women?”

Harry didn’t answer that, and Hermione’s magic tingled in her fingers, amplified by her disquiet.

Both gates to the camp opened with a loud groan.

“I told you to get five.” An old man stepped out from inside the camp. He was stooped and greyed, beard to his chest in the old fashion.

“Well, I have three,” the bounty hunter responded in a gruff voice. “You can take them or leave them.”

The old wizard pulled out a bifocal and floated the women closer, taking his time to examine them, lifting their hair, and running his hands along their legs.

“They look a little rough. Where did you catch them?”

“Oxford. They’d been illegally scavenging. This one doesn’t have her tongue.” He tapped the closest woman, dark hair covering her face, and gave a sharp laugh. “But that’s a bonus. None are virgins, and they’re older than what I usually bring, but all of them have their teeth. Another wave of mercenaries are coming from Spain, and we’ll need to prepare for them.”

Hermione clutched her stomach, experiencing the same type of sickness she’d had seeing the woman at the party pressed to the table, dead eyes staring back at her, red dress pushed up her hips. Her vision tunnelled, and she grabbed Harry’s shoulder for support.

The old man snorted, still feeling the women. Hermione’s horror twisted into molten anger, billowing through her chest like dragon fire.

Harry gripped her wrist, pulling her to standing. “We can’t fight. There are too many.”

She knew that. But her magic had other ideas, sizzling under the surface to be used.

The bounty hunter dismounted from his horse, patting its flank. “Let’s get them processed. I need to get back home by dinner tonight. Sherri is inviting our neighbours for a party.” He grabbed the reins and walked inside the camp beside the older man, their captive women levitating behind them.

Hermione couldn’t look at their faces as they hurried after them, ashamed about not helping, heart furiously pounding. They stayed under the cloak just inside the boundary of the work camp, completely still.

The gates snapped shut behind them, trapping them inside.

“Are you alright?” Harry whispered.

“I’m not sure,” she answered honestly.

“The bounty hunters capture muggle women for crimes that aurors feel are below them to deal with,” Harry whispered, voice gentle. “But it’s mostly without proof, so they might not have done anything. Then they transfer them to various camps. Once here, they are then given a choice between selling themselves to work off their sentence in the whorehouse or labour in the fields.”

“They—” she couldn’t finish the sentence.

Harry put an arm around her shoulders. “Do you want to see more?”

A part of her soul hardened inside her, a numbness that spread through her veins, poisoning her heart.

“Show me all of it.”

---

The main camp consisted of large rectangular brick buildings, lined neatly in rows. Nothing seemed special about them, having an industrial feel. The only demarcation was a number stamped on the door.

They snuck into one of the buildings easily, surprising Hermione at the lack of wards. But she supposed even with the lax security, it would be difficult for muggles to escape.

“They keep some of the women in this one,” Harry whispered.

The building contained long lines of makeshift rooms, empty at the time they entered. Each space held a bed and a bathroom. The women had tried to make it homey with colourful comforters and small vases of wildflowers. Some had books, others had art or musical instruments.

Harry watched her peering into a room, curious at the contents.

“If they show good behaviour, they are given favour by the guards,” Harry explained.

“Sometimes the men that frequent them give them gifts too.”

No matter how much the women tried to make the space comfortable, it was still a prison. Three of the walls were solid, some painted or wallpapered. Some with art or photos. But instead of a door, they had the iron bars of a cell, similar to the ones in the ministry.

“Where are they now?”

“Probably on their daily exercise runs. The wardens are militant with the women’s health and hygiene.”

“How do you know so much?”

“Sirius has brought me here several times. He wanted to show me the reality so I can remind myself what I’m fighting for.”

Hermione stared at the sad rooms, at the meagre possessions displayed with pride. Each of these women had hopes and dreams. Did they wish for love or a career or children?

“Why don’t they choose to work in the fields?”

Harry twisted his head and looked at her, green eyes glistening under his glasses.

“You’ll see.”

---

Harry flew low in the sky, twisting around the maze of brick buildings to get to the fields. They passed the group of women, about fifty of them, all exercising like Harry predicted. A woman in a grey cloak shouted orders at them, while a couple of guards lounged off to the side, smoking cigarettes.

Hermione didn’t have long to view them before they flew too far away. She wished she could scoop them all up and shuttle them to safety like she’d done with Julie. It hurt to pass them by and leave them behind.

“Do they capture the men to work too?”

“If a muggle man is charged with a crime, he’s normally killed. The workers in the fields sign up voluntarily.”

“Why would anyone choose to enter this hell?”

“Starvation. The camp commander makes them sign contracts for a loan that equals enough food, shelter, and necessities for a year. Once they begin work, they’re given a paltry wage, but it’s almost impossible to pay back the balance fully, leaving them in debt. It’s barely living. Some bring their wives and kids.”

Hermione went cold. “Families live here?”

“Yes,” he said, pointing to buildings near the north side. “Some of these are for single men, others for women, and the rest are built for families.”

The thought of children growing up in this environment—

Harry banked left sharply, avoiding a group of guards, flying low, so that no one could see under their cloak from below.

“What are those?” Big rectangular boxes were attached to tall poles at different points around the camp buildings. They looked like muggle equipment.

“Televisions to broadcast announcements, experimenting with mass communication. They also have multiple cameras to record the muggles. They’re fairly new. The Butcher’s been

implementing a surveillance system around the UK, but the camps are monitored the most heavily.”

Hermione was so disturbed she forgot her fear of flying. Titus hated muggle technology. It felt hypocritical of him to use it.

They soon arrived in the fields to see organised rows of men and a few women bending down and pulling potatoes out of the ground. Hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. It seemed endless.

In the distance, she noticed other types of crops, though she wasn't knowledgeable enough to identify them.

Wizards on horseback, and some hovering on brooms, monitored the workers.

Most of the muggle men didn't have shirts or adequate clothing for the weather, hair cut short, their backs striped with scars and wounds. Ribs showed, bones jutting from skin, resembling skeletons walking upright.

The air reeked of something putrid. The type of scent that stuck to clothing, rotten and pungent. She placed a hand over her nose to prevent retching.

“What's that awful smell?”

“Those.”

Harry pointed to the middle of the fields, showing spiked metal poles with scarecrows attached to them. She'd read about them once in a muggle book, used to protect crops from scavengers.

But on a second, closer glance, she saw past the illusion her brain wished to paint.

They weren't scarecrows at all, but decaying corpses, rotting in the sun until all identifiable features had been sloughed away. Flesh and blood replaced the traditional straw and cotton.

“Merlin.” Hermione clutched her nose and mouth, fearing she'd vomit.

“That's what happens when they try to run away without paying their debt,” Harry said.

“They keep them in the fields as a warning—”

“Get up!” one of the guards yelled below, flinging a curse at a worker. “I never said you could take a break.” The man yelped, and a red welt appeared on his back.

“He's hurting him,” she said, body tense, magic tingling so bad it was painful. “We have to stop it.”

“We can't.”

She'd never felt so helpless as when she watched the guard beat the man, only relenting when he pulled himself up and began picking the crops again, back red and bleeding.

“Why do they have to do this?” Hermione's eyes burned seeing the brutality. “They could help make the harvest faster with magic.”

“The amount of work they'd have to do to plant, grow, and pick the amount of crops necessary to feed the entire nation is too much, even for the wizards. Why bother wasting magic when they can make someone else do it for them? Most wizards find this work beneath them.”

Every potato she'd ever eaten had come from these fields. Every vegetable she'd stabbed with a fork or left on her plate after eating a bite and finding herself full. She'd never once questioned the source.

*Do you know how many people would trade places with you? You've never been without food. You always have the best clothes, while the rest of the country is struggling to survive. You have no clue what suffering really is.*

Titus had lied about many things, but he'd told her a painful truth then. She thought she'd seen the worst of it with the muggle cities and the decay and the parties and the mist.

But this was worse. All of the luxury she enjoyed. All of their food and books and ice cream — it originated in the welts and scars on the backs of muggles.

Calling them *voluntary* work camps was a ruse. Once a person entered the contract out of desperation, it became impossible to dismantle.

Could she continue living a life in a manor knowing all of the food and goods she consumed came at the cost of suffering? She'd been lied to all of her life.

An incandescent rage engulfed her, the likes of which she hadn't felt since Blaise. It simmered under her skin, powerful enough she thought she could Avada the whole lot of the guards in a blink.

She'd never considered herself truly bloodthirsty. But she felt it then— the urge to reach her hand into the chest of the nearest guard and rip out their heart. Watch it beat in her palm. She wished to see their shocked faces. Wished to be the one to send them to eternal torment.

“I think I need to go back.”

She needed to go before she did something she regretted.

“Okay,” Harry said.

She clenched her teeth as she trembled, wishing to help these people, finding it painful to suppress it.

As they flew back to the gate, almost clearing the south buildings, a shout broke through her internal distress.

She glanced up. “What's that?”

“I don’t know.” Another shout. “It sounds like it's from the children’s section.”

Her heart sank, fearing the worst.

“What do they do with the children?”

He shrugged. “The babies and young children stay in a nursery while their parents work. They have minders that watch them. Once they reach fifteen, they have to work half days in the fields, though they aren’t allowed to be beaten like the adults. From what I know, Nott is supposedly a stickler about the childrens' treatment, making sure they have decent food and playtime, but I'm not sure how well his rules are followed.”

Several more shouts.

“Whatever is happening, we can’t interfere,” Harry said. “We probably should leave.”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed, but Harry was already flying toward the disturbance.

They arrived at a circular gated playground with metal slides and creaking swings in the middle of the building complex.

Children should be crawling over every surface, laughing and squealing. Instead, they stood in straight lines, facing a group of guards that included the old man from earlier and the bounty hunter. Women—their minders, she suspected—walked along the lines of children keeping them behaved.

“The commander.” Harry pointed to a man with grey hair, cut severely short, who walked through the guards toward the front. He was middle-aged, dressed in pressed dress robes with heavy gold rings on each finger. “This must be serious. I’ve never seen him out—”

“My precious sweetlings,” the man crooned in a voice that crawled along her skin. “Earlier this morning, your minders found all of the crayons turned pink.”

His grin was a razor blade as he stared at the rows of shivering children, the littlest of which seemed to be around five. Whoever this man was, they were terrified of him. With his hands behind his back, the commander walked down the line of children, inspecting them slowly. One small girl pressed her face in her hands as if to hide.

“Now now, sweet little thing.” He reached down to gently stroke her cheek. “No one is in trouble. In fact, it's a miracle. Whoever tells me who did it will get a whole box of sweets and any toys they desire. The sooner someone tells me, the sooner you can get back to your play.”

“My dad said we shouldn’t tattle.” An older boy with freckles and bright blond hair stood tall and sneered.

The warden’s sharp smile faltered, and he let go of the little girl’s cheek and slowly walked to the boy, who shrank back at the towering figure.

“That’s just not true.” The commander placed a heavy palm on the boy’s curly hair. “We reward little boys who tell, especially about their parents.” He bent down, fishing out a

peppermint from his pocket, holding it out like a lure. “Do you know who turned the crayons pink?”

“N-no.”

“No what?”

“N-no sir.”

The commander straightened. “Anyone else?”

He waited, but no one answered. It was so silent she heard the crinkle of the peppermint wrapper as he closed his fist around the sweet.

“That’s a shame. I do so hate to give punishments. But I’m afraid I’ll be left with no choice, because one of your parents has been very naughty, lying to us, and they’ll all have to be questioned.”

A little girl with sunburned cheeks began to cry. She had brown hair, braided neatly, skinned knees, and sucked on her thumb to soothe herself. The Warden twisted in the direction of the cry, zeroing in on his prey.

“Bring her to me,” he demanded. A guard grabbed the girl and gently led her forward. She tried to hide behind the man’s legs, afraid of the commander, but she was shoved forward.

The commander once again leaned down and offered the peppermint, which was ignored, wiping away a tear on her cheek with his thumb.

“There’s nothing to fear from me.” He grabbed both her hands in a gentle hold. “Did you turn the crayons pink, darling?”

Her breathing hitched with subdued cries. “Mummy said it was bad.”

“No, no, little one. It’s wonderful. Did your daddy tell you that too?”

“I don’t have a daddy.” She began to cry again. “I just wanted a pink flower, but there was only green and blue.”

“Of course, you did. Pink is a lovely colour for a flower. In fact, soon you’ll get to live with a new mum and dad who will give you all the sweets you like. And I bet, they’d also make sure you can colour as many flowers pink as you’d like.”

“A new mum and dad? Will mummy come with me?”

“Maybe,” he lied. “Thank you for being brave and telling me the truth. Now go with your minder while we wait for the ministry.”

He stood and motioned to dismiss everyone. The women guided the children in lines as they walked toward a far building. The little muggleborn went the opposite way, holding the hand of a minder, one thumb still stuck in her mouth.



Hermione stood close enough to hear the commander's next orders, spoken in a low voice.

“Get the girl's mother and place her in building seventeen. Without her husband to procreate more magical offspring, she's useless to us and will serve as a severe reminder to the rest of them of what happens when they lie and hide. Geoffrey, get in contact with the ministry.” He grinned at the old man with the long beard from the gate. “We're going to be handsomely rewarded for this. Owl the Carrows too. They've been wanting a ward.”

Hermione froze at the names, a hand still over her mouth to prevent a scream. Even Titus hated the Carrows. They were banned from teaching at Hogwarts after proving too cruel to the pureblood heirs.

What would they do with a child in their grasp? Would the ministry actually grant their request?

Harry breathed just as hard as she did as they waited in the courtyard, watching as the guards dispersed, leaving them with the creak of empty swings.

“We have to get her out,” he said.

“How would we do that without getting caught?” Hermione, for once, was the voice of reason. “It's too dangerous.”

“I thought you said you were a Gryffindor? But perhaps you're just a coward.”

That was a low blow. She didn't want to leave the little girl either, whose only mistake was loving pink. And for that she'd be given to a pair of psychopaths. It would be a lifetime filled with unknowable torment. People like the Carrows didn't want to be loving parents to children. At best, they wanted a muggleborn pet as a status symbol. But even then, the girl would probably be mistreated.

“There's no way we could—” Hermione reached down and touched the edge of her trousers, remembering something.

No, she decided. Harry was right. She couldn't stand by and watch a little girl fed to monsters.

Not when she could stop it.

---

Hermione held the last vial of Titus' Polyjuice potion. It worked best freshly brewed. As time went on, it lost its efficacy. So if she drank this, she took a risk.

Was it worth it?

She imagined the sweet girl with braids in Amycus' grasp, young enough she still sucked on her thumb for comfort.

Her threshold for tolerance and inaction had hit its limit. A child couldn't protect itself. The little girl didn't have a wand, knowledge, or strength to fight.

But Hermione did.

"That looks nasty," Harry said, eyeing the remains of the bubbling brown liquid.

"It is," she agreed and drank it all. Within moments the potion began to work, her legs elongating, chest widening. Scruff sprouted on her chin as she readjusted her clothing and then bent down with her new height, so that her legs didn't poke out from under the hem of the invisibility cloak.

Hermione tapped her wand against her borrowed apparel, transfiguring it into Titus' Mediator outfit, body armour and all. She knew every button. Every snap. It would be indistinguishable to everyone, beside Titus himself.

---

Hermione waited until they were alone before stepping out from under the invisibility cloak, following the path of the guard who had taken the little girl. In her newly transfigured clothes, she made sure to copy Titus' swagger too. The slight gait to his walk, the way he kept his head high. She'd examined him enough to know his subtle cues.

When she came across her first guard, he shrank away under Titus' hard stare. The small group of muggles besides him gasped and trembled, keeping their heads down while she passed. It was disconcerting to cause so much fear just walking.

"The Butcher's here," she heard the whispers. Hermione resisted the temptation to adjust his clothes again.

"Where's the muggleborn?" she asked a guard she finally recognized— one she'd seen on the playground with the commander.

"This way."

---

The guard led her to one of the buildings.

The little girl sat outside with her minder. Someone had found a temporary table, along with a colouring book, and a whole box of crayons. She clutched a pink one, already scribbling away, looking so innocent, unaware that her whole world had been upended.

"Where's my mummy?" the girls asked.

"Quiet," the minder said without any vitriol. Hermione wondered how the woman could disconnect from her humanity to the extent that she could hand over a child she'd been tasked to care for.

When the minder glanced up and noticed Titus, she snapped to attention, straightening from her lazy stance leaning against the brick wall.

"I'm here for the girl," Hermione deepened her voice.

The minder looked confused. "I was told to wait for—"

"I would advise you to do as I say."

Titus was usually in charge of serious crimes, so his appearance was out of place.

"Yes, sir," the woman said without a second hesitation. "Get up, Caroline. It's time to go. You can bring your colours."

The girl blinked with a frown. "But I don't want to go with him."

Not having time to argue, Hermione reached down and picked up the colouring book and crayons and tucked them in her cloak. Caroline gave a little cry at the sudden theft.

"Be a brave girl and come with me. We can colour later, and I'll let you pick out a sweet."

Caroline glanced back at her minder, and then let Hermione take her tiny hand, sticking her opposite thumb in her mouth again like a toddler.

Like she hoped, no one stopped or questioned Titus Nott as they walked away.

The next moments were a blur as Hermione continued her long trip around the buildings, heart pounding, the girl in her grasp. This all seemed way too easy, and Hermione found herself growing a little paranoid. The heat of the sun bore down on her. Sweat trickled down the nape of her neck, and her disguise shimmered under the light more than it should.

"Where are you taking me?" The little girl whimpered.

With horror, Hermione watched the skin on Titus' hand ripple. Like she suspected, the polyjuice didn't last very long. She didn't have much time before the disguise faded.

"Somewhere safe." Hermione made sure no one could see and made a quick decision. "Stupefy." The girl collapsed, finger still in her mouth. Remembering her own rescue, Hermione knew the child was too young to be reasoned with. She couldn't risk a struggle, especially if she frightened her by turning back into a woman.

Hermione picked up the confused child and hurried along. The fake dragon hide boots crunched over pebbles as they entered the playground, knowing Harry was under the invisibility cloak.

"I have her," she said.

"And no one followed you?" Harry only lifted the cloak enough so that Hermione could slip under.

"No."

"She's so young." He stared at her for a long time. "Flying with three might be difficult."

"We won't need to fly."

Hermione shifted the girl into Harry's hold, while she snuck her hand into her trousers and into her hidden pouch, coming out with a small black box.

"What is that?" Harry asked.

She opened the box, seeing an ordinary rock nestled in velvet.

"A single-use portkey to the manor."

"Malfoy manor?" Harry spat. "Are you mental? Malfoy hates me."

"Besides maybe forcing me to stay behind, he won't do a thing. You can use the floo after, if you need. Or you could fly back to the base."

Harry seemed sceptical. "You really trust him, don't you?"

"I do."

"Alright," he said. "I don't trust him, but I strangely trust you."

Hermione reached inside the box and touched the rock the same time Harry did, forcing Caroline's little fingers to touch as well.

They waited.

And waited.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Hermione said. "It's not working, but that's impossible. Draco gave it to me."

A faulty portkey. Something about it twisted her stomach, slightly painful like pressing against a loose tooth. Draco would never give her something that didn't work.

But that knowledge didn't change the fact that nothing she did activated it.

She'd think through it later. Right now, they were wasting time and needed to get out of the camp before ministry officials showed up and locked it down.

"Do you think you could apparate?"

"I've never attempted side-along," Harry admitted.

That left only one option.

---

By the time they straddled the broom and completed the disillusionment charms, she'd changed back into herself. But even with her smaller size, they still found it awkward with two adults and a heavy, catatonic child between them. Harry flung the girl across his lap, but it showed more of their legs than before, even if they flew low.

The broom lifted, struggling to manoeuvre with the added weight. Under the bright sunlight, the charm was far more visible than she'd like. The outline of the broom and feet shimmered in a way that might give away their location if people looked too closely.

Harry's Firebolt wasn't as new or fast as Draco's, but he pushed it to the limit, zooming around building corners.

A minute into their flight a loud alarm rent the air, screeching so loud she jumped and almost lost her grip.

"They know she's missing," she said. "Fly faster!"

"I'm flying as fast as I can."

Not fast enough. And not hidden enough.

A curse sizzled by her ear, just barely missing. Hermione twisted to see two wizards trailing after them on brooms.

Harry cursed under his breath, managing to evade another curse.

Hermione fired back, only using defensive spells, but she'd never duelled while flying, and she missed each time.

Harry twisted around a building close to the gate, and then flipped up. Hermione bit her tongue to keep from screaming at the trick move. Any other time and she'd beat him for that, but the two wizards flew along, unaware they now hovered close to the roof of the building.

He didn't waste time, zipping off into the opposite direction, keeping silent until they flew over the endless fields.

"I think we should just fly over the wall," Harry said over the rushing wind. "Even if it trips the charms. They already know we're here, so we need to avoid the entrance. I could outfly \_\_\_"

A spell struck their broom, spinning it. Hermione let out a scream, attempting to hold on, but centrifugal force ripped her from the broom, and she hurtled to the ground.

"Arresto momentum," she screamed right before she would have splattered, and then collapsed to the ground. She panted at the near miss, glancing up.

Harry just counteracted the broom spinning curse, somehow still holding onto the girl. His cloak had slid off his head, making it look as if he floated mid-air.

The same two wizards they thought they'd outsmarted had turned around and were on their way, curses zinging from their wands— immobilising spells, she assumed. They didn't seem to want to risk hitting the girl. Hermione managed to deflect two as Harry gained his bearings. They were close enough now to see their features, recognizing one of them as the old man from the gate— Geoffrey, she believed he'd been called.

“I’m coming to get you,” Harry called, the broom still slightly wobbling. A blue curse hurtled over his head.

Hermione’s stomach sank as she measured the distance in her mind. Her mind quickly flipped through the risks. If he flew down, the men would be upon them before they could get back up. All three of them would be caught and detained and everything would be pointless.

“There’s no time,” she screamed. “Keep flying. Save the girl.”

“I’m not going to leave you.” Finally finding his balance, he ignored her plea and started flying toward her.

Her heart wrenched in her chest, realising she couldn’t allow that. If Harry was caught, they’d kill him— but they might not do the same to her.

She focused on how it felt to see the muggles' backs filled with scars. The scarecrow corpses. The women floating to their fate. The children in a line. The hate wasn’t toward Harry, but it strengthened her intent.

“Imperio,” she screamed, feeling the familiar suffocation of the unforgivable, but it zipped out of her wand even easier than the last time. The curse struck Harry. “Go back to the Order base. Save yourself and Caroline. Fly as fast as you can and don’t get caught. I’ll distract them.”

With a flat expression, Harry paused mid-air. Only for a moment, and then he did as she ordered, flying away at lightning speed, one of the guards on his tail. The old man broke off from the chase and flew toward her, probably thinking she was easier prey.

Hermione glanced around, making a quick assessment of her location. She’d landed in a potato field, the leaves crunching under her boots. In the distance, the muggles still laboured.

The disturbance of her falling had caught the attention of some of the guards, and several were already headed her way on brooms.

Hermione flung up a protego as a yellow curse bounced off. She twisted and ran, not sure where to go. The wall was too far to reach, and she couldn’t scale it without a broom. Two guards on brooms hurtled toward her, and more were on their way. Multiple wizards could be seen flying in the distance.

Unable to figure out what to do, she continued to run, using protegos to deflect the curses as they zipped by her head. She ducked and zigzagged, finally stopping when she neared one of the metal poles topped with a scarecrow corpse.

The smell of it burned her nose with each breath as she neared.

Instead of passing it by, she bent down, gasping and retching, and then straightened, glancing up the metal. Above her, the feet of a dead muggle dangled. She saw now that his body had been impaled on a spike from the top. But he barely looked human, skin darkened and bloated.

This man's only crime had been attempting to run from the monsters now chasing her.

She twisted to view the oncoming storm of wizards, the scarecrow corpse above her. An odd calm overtook her. An acceptance.

Running only wasted her energy. Like the murdered muggle, there was no way to escape this.

Hermione clutched her wand, crouching down into the duelling stance that Titus taught her.

If this was a fight to the death, then she'd show them she was no lamb to be led to the slaughter. She'd show them that she'd been trained to fight by the Butcher. That she learned dark magic from the Malfoys. Her final bite would be aimed for their throats.

In her last moments, she'd force her opponents to face her as an equal.

Geoffrey landed before the other wizards reached them, wand pointed at her.

"Drop your wand."

"As you wish." She did as he asked, letting it tumble to the dirt. But it was his mistake. Like she planned, he let his guard down, only seeing a defenceless woman.

"Now lie on the ground—"

Hermione lifted her wrists and twisted, magic focused with sharpened intention.

The old man's head exploded like the vases in Malfoy manor, liquified into a spray of crimson, bone, and brain matter. It fertilised the ground around them, splattering across her skin. His headless body collapsed like snipping a puppet's strings.

"Fucking hell," she whispered in shock. The amount of blood a body could carry would always surprise her, watching it seep into the Earth from an empty neck. She accioed her wand back into her hand, knowing the same trick wouldn't work twice.

A red curse struck her side— a spell that burned her skin— but it was a weak one. Hermione managed to counter it with minimal skin damage just as the two guards arrived, catapulting off their brooms. They stepped over their dead comrade on the ground and attacked, spells meant to subdue.

They wanted her alive, but she wanted them dead.

Her brain went deadly silent as she began to fight, relying on training and instinct. Remembering the way Titus corrected her stance, taught her to curve a spell. The way to spin and protect her back while protecting her front. She'd watched his graceful movements and had practised them to perfection for years. Step, slash, duck, twist, slash, step.

As the curses slammed into her shields, she imagined herself a coiled snake, defensive until the perfect strike.

It didn't take long. Even though it was two to one, they were sloppy and ill-trained. They'd grown complacent, only oppressing people they considered easy victims. She waited for an opening, and when the youngest of the guards wobbled in his stance, she went on the offensive.

"Oculus Lacrimam!" she viciously curved her spell, striking him in the side. His eyes went opaque, rolling up, and then ripped out of the sockets. He screamed, clutching his face, but it did nothing to replace his eyes.

"What did you do to him, bitch?!" a guard next to him with red hair growled.

"He'll never see again."

"I'm going to kill you!" The man reacted in fury like she'd hoped, letting his anger make him careless.

*Use the element of surprise.*

He was so focused on her right hand, he didn't catch that she was ambidextrous. With her left, she flung an "Afflicto!" aimed at his dominant side. His arm snapped like a twig. Then with a quick expelliarmus, his wand hurtled away from him, preventing him from using the counter-curse to fix it.

The guard dropped to his knees in agony, defenceless, eyes wide, realising his sudden vulnerability as she stepped toward him with her wand raised. Given time to study his features, she recognized him as one of the guards that had stood aside and let a man be beaten while harvesting potatoes. How many other people had he tormented?

Her rage returned, infecting her soul. All of the horrors she'd seen condensed into this single moment.

"Mercy," he begged while she levitated his body, placing it directly above the metal spike holding the rotting corpse.

He screamed and pleaded, understanding her intent. She hesitated only a moment, and then she remembered the bloody backs of muggles, the rooms for the women. And her rage turned cold.

"I don't grant mercy to monsters."

Hermione dropped him, grimacing at the noises of death his body made, turning her face away from the grisly sight of it. Finished with her task, she forced her attention back to the wizards racing toward her. Planning to kill them all, one by one.

But before she could twist back around, a blue spell slammed into her back, toppling her over — a petrificus totalus. Her frozen mouth came into contact with the fields, face buried into a tangle of leaves. Globbs of dirt sucked into her mouth with each breath.

She didn't stay in that position long, because hands grabbed and shoved her over, forcing her to stare up into the face of the bounty hunter.



Releasing the curse, he grabbed her wrists, slamming them hard into the Earth, straddling her stomach. “Who the fuck are you?”

She spit in his face, and he backhanded her. The collision forced her face to the side with a crack. Black dots exploded in her vision, and the pain shocked her whole body. Never in her life had she’d been hit like that— by a man, with his whole force behind it. She was unable to think through the intense pain.

The bounty hunter wasted no time interrogating. He stood up and kicked her in her side, the steel toe of his boot cracking against ribs. Then he leaned over and slammed her head against the metal of the pole. She could no longer think. Could barely breathe from the pain. Blood filled her mouth as he knocked her around like a doll.

This man didn’t really want her answers. He wanted to punish her. Maybe because the old man had been his friend. She didn’t have the breath to plead, only to scream as the beating continued. She had no way to judge how long it went on until it stopped.

“If you kill the woman before I can question her, I’ll be very angry,” a familiar voice cut through the agony.

The hands abruptly left Hermione’s body, and she curled to the side, attempting to crawl away in self-preservation. She only got as far as the metal spike, fresh crimson dripping down from the guard she’d killed above, splattering against her skin. Dirt and thick blood leaked out of her mouth and smeared across her face.

Through blurry eyes, she watched as Titus dismounted his broom. He reached in his pocket and slowly pulled on his leather gloves— ones he often used for torture. He didn’t rush, using the time to intimidate her.

Since she’d lost awareness from the beating, many more guards and aurors had arrived. They surrounded her, all with wands out, pinning her in place.

“The minder said I’d taken the muggleborn, but that would be impossible.” The leather of Titus’ dragon hide gloves creaked as he finished putting them on. “Now here you are, yet the girl is gone.”

She could only see his boots as he stalked closer and crouched down. “Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said. “You’re going to tell me where you put the little muggleborn. Then you’re going to tell me who you work for, everything you know, and how the fuck you managed to get one of my hairs for polyjuice. If I’m satisfied, then I’ll consider a faster death, though I must warn you that I’m very annoyed you dared to impersonate me. Now—” He reached down, grabbed the back of her hair, and yanked up, pulling her face into view. “Let’s see who you—”

Titus froze for a long time, blue eyes widening. She rarely saw him surprised, but his mouth opened and closed in shock. The hands in her hair loosened, gently transferring to her face, cradling her jaw.

“Sprite?” He brushed her curls away, sticky with blood. “Bloody hell, what the fuck are you — why the fuck are you here?”

She could only groan in pain. As he examined her wounds, his occlumency shields snapped into place.

“Tell me what hurts the most.”

“My side.”

She flinched when he pressed against the most tender spot, counting his way across her bones.

“Your ribs are broken.” His wand glowed, whispering a *Brackium Emendo*, and the bones snapped back into place. She arched with a cry of pain and panted, opening her eyes fully for the first time as his wand glowed slowly over her body and face, using *episkey*s to deal with smaller wounds.

As he healed her, calculations played in Titus’ gaze, as if projecting every possible outcome in a moment and choosing the best one he thought available. When he was finally done, he gently let his gloved thumb glide along the bruised flesh of her cheek. “Cleaning up this mess will come at a cost.”

The touch made her shiver, seeing him in a different light. She glanced up at the feet dangling above her and then at the muggles in the distant field. Titus wasn’t just a passive observer—he was one of the *architects*. And if she’d been anyone else, his fingers would be giving pain instead of healing.

“Don’t touch me,” she whispered.

His expression shuttered again, and his hold firmed.

“Tell me where the girl is, Sprite.”

Harry must have gotten away, or he wouldn’t ask that question. A tightness uncurled in her chest. She might be just an ordinary muggleborn, but she’d saved both Julie and Caroline from horrid fates, and she wouldn’t let him take that from her.

“You’ll have to torture it out of me.”

“Your mind is addled. Don’t be stubborn. You have nowhere to go and no ability to fight me. Resistance to my questions is foolish. I’ll give you another chance—”

“Why are you healing the bitch?” the bounty hunter interrupted. “She killed Geoffrey and should be strung up with the rest of the muggles.”

A muscle in Titus’ jaw clenched, and he took a deep breath, nostrils flaring. He softly lowered her, pocketing her wand and stood up, turning to the bounty hunter. “Were you the one who beat her?”

Her assailant stepped forward, chest puffed with pride, though she saw the way he swallowed hard with nerves. “Yes, sir. She killed Monty and Geoffrey and blinded Tealson.”

“Did she?” Titus viewed the carnage—the man impaled on the pole and a body with a crimson halo in place of head—as if seeing it for the first time. It was hard to tell for sure, but he seemed impressed.

“Yes.”

“You unfortunately misstepped.” Titus’ wand slashed down in a vicious stroke. A red light struck the bounty hunter, and he clutched at his throat and collapsed, unable to make sounds, unable to breathe. His face turned an ugly purple as Titus glared at the convulsing body at his feet, free hand twitching with restraint. “Cruicio!” he added. The green light lit up his face even under the sun, illuminating his enjoyment while inflicting pain. He waited callously a few more moments before letting up, muttering the countercurse to the suffocation spell.

“Get him out of my sight before I kill him.” An auror silenced the bounty hunter and levitated him away before Titus could make good on his threat. “The next person who even breathes in her direction will be sliced in two. I don’t care if she murders ten wizards, no one touches her but me, does everyone understand?”

A mumbled chorus of “yes, sir” answered him.

Partially healed, Hermione’s mind began to work again, making a list of her problems.

She’d killed two camp guards and blinded a third. If she was dragged back to the ministry, she’d be interrogated and punished, even with Titus’ intervention. Dolohov and his warnings infected her mind, the shadow dogs tearing at her legs. This time she’d actually killed purebloods and helped steal two muggleborns. Not to mention if they figured out about Travers. What would he do to her?

Hermione wasn’t willing to stick around to find out.

Titus had her wand, distracted with punishing her attacker. He’d turned his back on her, because he believed her defanged due to her injuries. And he was right. What could she do? She might be able to defeat a few poorly trained guards, but the men surrounding her were deadly aurors, and she’d never be able to win a duel against Titus.

But she still had her magic.

An idea entered her mind, something insane, but she was just desperate enough to try it.

Her magic tingled in her fingers, but she had no time to build it up to the amount she wanted.

She imagined her destination clearly, having practised entering the same place hundreds of times, but she’d never gone such a long distance. Nor had she ever attempted it injured.

Titus turned and sighed, examining her raised wrists. “I thought I said not to fight me. You’re already in enough trouble. Don’t make it worse for yourself. I’d hate to bind you in this state, but I will if I must.”

His wand came up to stop her.

But she was faster.

"Malfoy Manor," she whispered.

In a blink, Hermione apparated.

And splinched.

Art created by [Frau Blucher](#)



## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings: graphic depictions of violence, references to slavery and sexual slavery, and death

# Chapter 44: Cat and Mouse

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience! Between my RL schedule, some health issues, and the length of this chapter, it took longer than expected to get it posted. But I did it!

Thank you to MyPrivateInsanity for her lovely beta work! And for my alpha groups' eagle eyes!

Trigger warning and Song Suggestion at the end:

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

## Cat and Mouse

A spray of crimson. A blinding pain.

Hermione crashed into the front sitting room, just barely missing the glass Aphrodite next to the side table. She groaned in agony, glancing down at her wrist to find her hand gone, dark red blood flowing from the stump, already creating a puddle on the floor.

“Vulnera Sanentur!” she yelled three times between gasping breaths, attempting to stop the bleeding, but the pain blocked the sharpened intention needed to complete it. She’d gotten so proficient using both wrists for wandless magic that losing one crippled her.

“Mipsy!”

On call, the elf popped into the room and placed a delicate mottled hand against her mouth. “Mistress Hermione!”

The next few moments were a blur. Hermione watched in a stupor as the elf performed basic first aid as best as she could. The numbing spells cracked over her, trickling down her skin like an icy stream.

“Where’s Draco?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“Master hasn’t been at the manor for days.”

Another spell tied off her arteries with a severe pinch, preventing further blood loss.

“Where’s Theo?”

“Master’s friend has relocated to his flat.”

Hermione was alone in the manor.

With the brief cessation of pain, she attempted to grab onto the yellow silk sofa to raise herself, but she collapsed again, leaving a bloody handprint behind. Her body still ached from the beating, and losing a hand paralysed her thoughts. Unable to believe what just happened, she leaned her head against the floor, shivering in shock, while Mipsy cleaned off what blood she could on her body and the floor.

Titus knew her destination. She'd been forced to say Malfoy Manor. Soon he'd arrive, which meant she needed to get out of the manor as soon as possible.

But where should she go? Apparition was out of the question, leaving only floo or broom travel. If she went anywhere public, she'd be detained, and she had no time to get polyjuice.

Maybe she could go to Theo's flat? It wouldn't be a long term solution, but he'd hide her if she asked, and then he could possibly reconnect her with Draco.

No matter what, she just needed to make it to the fireplace.

Cradling her splinched arm against her chest, Hermione almost vomited as she forced herself to lopsidedly crawl, still dizzy from the litany of spells placed on her.

The pop of floo stopped her journey as a familiar figure swished through the low flames, trailing green sparks with him.

Titus loomed over her, stuck within the boundaries of the fireplace, his face severe, blue eyes cold and sharp as daggers. Despite him not being able to walk into the room without being decapitated, the danger he presented slicked down her spine.

"You're in *very* big trouble, Sprite."

A whistling sound sliced through the air, screeching before dissipating.

"What was that?" Her stomach sank while forcing herself to stand on wobbling legs. Blood had dripped and dried in patches along her skin—her own indistinguishable from the men she'd killed.

"We've disabled the other floos," Titus explained. "And ministry elves have added anti-apparition wards outside the property. All known exits out of the manor to the grounds are being monitored, and as soon as we get past the wards, we'll be setting up caterwauling charms along the perimeter of the building. You're officially under arrest, Hermione."

Without meaning to, she backed away, clutching her arm tighter to her chest in fear.

He glanced down at her retreating feet and then at her empty, bloody wrist. Slowly, as if not to spook her, he held out his hand, giving a beckoning motion to walk toward him. "You need medical attention and must be in so much pain. Resisting this will only hurt you further. Come to me, and let me bring you to St. Mungo's to reattach your hand." He patted his pocket, showing a bulge under the fabric where her missing limb resided.

Her stomach lurched again at the sight, a phantom pain running down her arm. She thought she might pass out with the reminder that she was missing a body part, swaying on her feet.

“What’s the point of healing me, if Dolohov will just kill me afterward?”

“You’re going to have to trust me.”

Why did he always tell her to trust him, as if he hadn’t lied to her in multiple ways throughout her life? As if he hadn’t twisted his words to suit his needs before? She’d never trust him again.

Even if she survived Dolohov, she doubted there wouldn’t be punishment.

No, Draco was her top priority. She needed to warn him.

“Mipsy, go tell your master that the aurors are arresting me, and they’ll come for him next. Tell him—” she hesitated, realising what she had to sacrifice. Titus might kill Draco if he showed up trying to protect her. “Tell him to stay away and hide. It’s too dangerous.”

The boundaries the aurors created wouldn’t hold in Mipsy, even with elf made anti-apparition wards, but it would prevent Hermione from going with her.

The elf tugged on her ears. “But mistress Hermione, I can’t leave you—”

“I order you to go!”

Since Draco had given Mipsy instructions to always listen to her, the family magic worked instantly. The elf appeared distressed as she raised her skinny arm and vanished.

“All your efforts to evade me will be futile,” Titus said in an even tone. “If you don’t surrender on your own, then I’ll begin working on breaking the wards— though we might not have to, since we’ve already detained Lucius at the ministry.”

Hermione shivered at the revelation. She took another step backward, and his eyes snapped to her feet again.

“Last warning.” He raised his wand.

She refused to make this easy for him and march to her punishment like a good little slave.

“If you want to arrest me, then it will be bound and dragged from here.”

“For a year, I’ve desired to steal you from this manor, and I’m no longer waiting. So go ahead and run, but I’ll find you.” Titus clenched his jaw and violently slammed his wand against the wards. “Confracto!” The walls of the room creaked with the force, shaking the floor under her feet.

Hermione took his advice and ran, only glancing back once to see Titus carving smoking runes in the air around him, combating the ward retaliation. The burning symbols glowed bright red, leaking tendrils of dark soot. Sweat dripped down Titus’ temple, teeth clenched in a grimace of focused concentration, but his eyes stayed locked on her as she staggered out of the sitting room.

Her blind escape slowed toward the bottom of the grand staircase, not knowing what to do. At any moment, either bribery or force could have Lucius letting them past the wards. If it didn't benefit himself, she doubted he would hold out long.

Since the exits were being monitored, her only option to escape would be to find the Malfoy safe rooms and then a ward hole. But it had taken years to discover the one at Nott manor, and even then, it was found only by chance. The odds of her finding the Malfoy Manor ward hole today on her own—

Her body snapped straight, realising something obvious.

No one would know the secrets of the manor— except a Malfoy. Lucky for her, the manor was full of them, even if they were no longer living.

And one of them in particular was very... chatty.

With a clear destination, Hermione renewed her determination and scrambled up the staircase. Each footstep caused a stabbing pain through her nerves, jolting past Mipsy's healing charms. Behind her, she heard the crash of magic, felt the trembling in the edges of the manor.

When she scaled the last step of the staircase, stepping into the east corridor, the assault on the wards abruptly ceased. Hermione paused, listening carefully in the sudden silence, insides clenching in fear. Tearing down ancient wards like the Malfoys' should have taken days, possibly weeks, even with specialised help.

There shouldn't be silence so soon, which meant the wards hadn't cracked.

*The aurors had been let inside.*

"Hurry, hurry," a young girl yelled from a portrait. "They're coming your way."

She listened to the portrait. Doing her best to ignore the growing pain, she travelled the familiar route to the sculpture gallery, displaying busts fashioned after distinguished ancestors.

Septimus Malfoy perched toward the center of the slumbering statues. She'd listened to his stories for hours when she'd first moved to the manor, so she picked him out from the crowd easily.

"Septimus—" she whispered. "Wake up. I need your help."

When she tapped his neck, he opened his heavy stone eyelids.

"Hermione! It's been so long since you've graced me with your—"

She placed her finger to his lips for quiet.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor she'd just exited.



An auror was close.

Septimus must have sensed her fear, because when she lunged past him and flung herself behind a tall silk curtain, he didn't say another word.

Hermione forced herself to be still, gathering her magic into her remaining hand as fast as possible. It tingled as it descended her arm but remained weaker than normal.

The pathetic accumulated amount wouldn't help her win a duel, especially against a person trained for it, even if she surprised them. Instead of fighting, she needed to hide, and a simple curtain wasn't enough to conceal her from an auror.

Hermione stared at the busts around her, struck by another idea. The aurors would use revealing spells to make their search go faster. But any spell could be manipulated, given the nature of the magic. All she needed to do was bypass detection by transforming into something not so *human*.

*Create an illusion.*

"Duro Cutis." Hermione twisted her wrist, and the skin on her fingers began to turn grey and hardened. Compared to when she'd first landed, she managed better focus, though her magic still felt clumsy with only one hand. The stone skin spread along her limbs, stopping just below her neck. "Work," she urged, but despite her efforts, the spell began to recede. Frustration overwhelmed her. If she'd possessed both hands, completing the transfiguration would have been simple to achieve.

She controlled her breathing, pushing her fear into the empty books in her mind, knowing occluding might be the difference between life and death. Renewing the spell, the stone skin spread to most of her lower body, though it still remained incomplete as an auror entered the room.

Like she predicted, the woman raised her wand and muttered a *Homenum Revelio*.

An invisible presence swooped over her— a shadow— but didn't press down like it normally would, passing her by.

With the inconclusive results, the auror stared down at her wand in confusion, shaking it a few times.

She tried the spell again. The shadow swooped down, and once again passed her by, giving inconclusive results for the second time.

"Forgive me, my dear," Septimus spoke up from his perch. "But a revealing spell is useless in a room full of animated human statues. The results will always be ambiguous."

That was a lie. Portraits, statues, and ghosts could never be mistaken by magic as being alive. They were just impressions. Like a mirror image.

But the falsehood, said with confident authority, managed to convince the auror. She seemed young for the position, perhaps only a few years out of Hogwarts, and not everyone had

studied advanced transfiguration as obsessively as Hermione.

Always the conversationalist, Septimus continued to ask questions. “Are you looking for someone?”

“A muggleborn,” the woman answered. “Perhaps you’ve seen her before—”

“That filthy mudblood! Fouling our hallowed halls with her abhorrent magic. I saw her run past this room not but a minute ago. Am I fortunate enough to hope that you’ll remove the lingering stench of that abomination?”

The woman gave a low snort of laughter. “That’s our plan.”

“Then may Morgana quicken your steps. From portrait gossip, she likes to linger in the old atrium near the ballroom.”

The woman nodded her head. “Thank you very much.”

Hermione waited until the woman exited the statuary before she allowed herself to blink. It took another full minute for her to dare reverse the transfiguration, and right on time. Her magic had depleted much faster than normal, fingers already exposed. A third *Homenum Revelio* might not have been so inconclusive.

After removing the stone skin, painful twinges emerged that hadn’t been there before, the charms Mipsy applied already dissipating, as if she’d ripped off a bandage that had adhered to the wound.

“It’s safe now,” Septimus whispered. “I hope you don’t take any offence to the rotten words I used. I thought it prudent to remove her as fast as possible.”

“No offence taken.” She stepped out from behind the curtain, attempting to cast a disillusionment charm, but her energy had depleted so much, it failed. “Are there any routes out of the manor? Secret passageways for the heirs?”

“In the Master bedroom. They change the location with each new Malfoy, but it’s usually in a cabinet or a wardrobe. If you tap it three times, a door will open to reveal a tunnel that will exit into the greenhouse. But I must warn you— it usually only opens to family members or wives.”

She wondered if it would even let her through, since she wasn’t technically a Malfoy.

“Are there any others?”

“Not that I know about.”

“What about getting off the property after that?”

Even with his expressions hindered by stone, Septimus managed to look contemplative. “In my search for it as a youth, I never found a ward hole. But there *is* a gateway the gardeners

used to use to exit the grounds. Once they left, they couldn't reenter except by the gate or through the floo, of course, but I think it would help you escape."

"Where is it?"

"A stone's throw past the south pond. There used to be an old oak tree, though I'm not sure if it would be there anymore, and right next to it is a statue of a gnome. Grab its hand and a door will appear."

Perfect. Despite her body flooding with fear, hope also bloomed inside her. She had a plan. Something to do. Somewhere to go.

"Thank you!" Hermione allowed herself to waste a few precious seconds to plant a kiss on his stone cheek. If Septimus had been living, he'd be blushing. "I'll miss your stories." He'd been her first friend in the house, making her feel welcome, even as the original portraits hissed vitriol.

"A goodbye to you too, my fair maiden. May you always—"

Hermione ran from the room before he could finish, knowing he'd continue to talk forever if she let him.

---

The portraits helped her navigate the corridors, informing her of the aurors' locations. She was grateful Draco had purged the ones that used to spit "mudblood" at her, leaving the ancestors who liked her—or at least tolerated her presence.

As she ran, even the ones who only tolerated her helped her move around. Though they may despise muggleborns, they hated the intruders even more.

"Hide in this alcove."

"The bald one is gone now."

"Turn around and go the other way."

Their voices whispered the correct directions until she reached the master bedroom, tiptoeing inside. Even knowing it would be a pathetic fight if she encountered an auror, she raised her wrist in preparation to defend herself, feeling vulnerable without her full magic.

Turning toward the ensuite bathroom, a shocked yelp exited her mouth. She clapped a hand against her lips after releasing the sound.

A dead auror was slumped next to a dresser. He looked to be about Titus' age, with blond hair and freckles. Blood trickled out of the side of his mouth, burn marks streaking up his arm, with one hand still attached to the drawer handle.

Draco's dresser must have been steeped in blood wards—something she hadn't known. She glanced around the room, calming herself, wondering what else might be booby trapped for

the aurors.

It didn't matter. Even blood wards could be cracked or bypassed if they brought Lucius along to break them. Her only true hope was the passageway, and even that would only be temporary.

She began her search for the safe room, tapping on the cabinets under the side tables and dressers like Septimus told her, accidentally knocking over a few picture frames in the process. She didn't bother cleaning up any mess as she approached her wardrobe that housed heavy winter cloaks.

"Let this work." She opened the wardrobe, shoving some of the cloaks aside, knowing she didn't have a lot of time.

Three knocks, and the universe answered her plea. A rectangular door in the backing of the wardrobe popped open, revealing a darkened tunnel beyond.

Hermione froze a moment, wondering how it worked for her. Either Draco had added her blood to the wards without her knowing, which was entirely possible since she never seemed to have issue with touching anything in the manor— or the binding spell at the ritual was enough for the wards to consider her his bride. She touched her stomach right over the marks he'd burned into her, contemplating the idea.

She didn't second guess her luck, crawling through the makeshift door into the muggy tunnel crafted out of old stone. From her vantage point, she could see only a tunnel gradually sloping down into a darkened void, housing only cobwebs.

The door snapped closed behind her once she was fully inside, just barely missing her trouser leg. The backing turned solid again, but from this side of the tunnel, it resembled a window to the master bedroom.

The charms involved in the escape tunnel impressed her— so advanced and enduring it must have had Goblin input.

Feeling safe for the first time since she fell from Harry's broom, she let herself rest against the wall, hyperventilating from the shock and horror. She cradled her empty wrist to her chest, finally allowing herself to feel the pain, both mental and physical, leaning over with a silent scream. Everything hurt, twisting her lungs and heart into knots, grieving that she might be crippled magically forever if she couldn't get her hand back from Titus. Her wounded psyche wished to descend into despair, knowing the small odds of truly escaping this unscathed. If she stayed much longer in this fake safety, the severe exhaustion could tempt her to sleep, unable to have the strength to continue. But she needed a moment to just breathe.

"I'll get back to him. We'll be okay," she whispered the platitudes until she believed them.

Minutes later, the sound of heavy footsteps broke her internal crisis.

Hermione blinked sleepy eyes, watching as Titus stalked into her room with Thorfinn Rowle at his back. The Malfoy master bedroom was giant, but between both the men's substantial bulk, they seemed to fill up the space.

Thorfinn noticed the dead auror first. "Bloody fuck, Solberg is dead."

"Merlin, how many times do I have to repeat myself?" Titus gave a huff of exasperation. "Go remind the others for the millionth time not to touch a single fucking thing in this manor, if at all possible. There are old eviscerating charms and blood magic all over the place. Malfoy has always been interested in dark objects. Just assume everything has teeth."

"Right away, sir." Thorfinn gave a playful salute, which Titus rolled his eyes at goodnaturedly, and left the room.

Once alone, the Mediator carefully toured the room, wand clutched tightly in his hand. He stopped his inspection at the table closest to her side of the bed, noticing the picture frames that had fallen. One of them was faced up, showcasing Draco and her cuddled up on a couch, watching a movie. She'd been staring at the screen mid-laughter, but Draco had been watching her, as if drinking in the sight of her joy.

Titus grimaced in revulsion and stepped on it, cracking the glass with the heel of his boot.

After shoving it aside, Titus' stare pinned to the red bedspread beside him for a long time. She wondered what he imagined. Did he envision her naked in the sheets, curled against Draco's sleeping body? Did he think of them having sex?

Whatever played out in his mind made his hand twitch, but he withheld any other impulsive acts of destruction, bending down to search under the bed.

A hiss.

"There you are, you evil kneazle." He reached under the bed frame, tugging out a yowling Crookshanks by the scruff of his neck, red scratches lining Titus' wrists. Her orange familiar swiped at him again, but Titus kept him in a tight hold against his chest as he struggled.

"Calm, Crooks." Titus braved scratching him behind the ears. "You know I won't hurt you—so much like your mistress. Stubborn as a bull, unreasonably hostile, and unable to comprehend that you don't need to fight me." He paused, grinning. "All this time, I'd worried needlessly that you'd gotten snatched by an eagle. I should have known you'd find her."

Titus petted her cat with firm strokes, until the traitor actually looked as if he enjoyed it, succumbing to the temptation, pushing his furry head into the palm of his hand for more. Titus gave a pleased grunt at the rare affection, before leaving her cat on the bed to continue his search of the room.

It wasn't long before he noticed the wardrobe with the door ajar—the only other thing out of place in the room. Given the heavy use of wards in the room and no extra dead bodies, it was easy to assume that whoever opened the wardrobe had lived after unlatching it.

It would have been impossible to close it behind her. But still, she almost cursed, knowing it gave her away.

Titus was no fool. Most pureblood manors had similar escape tunnels to keep the head of household safe. She'd never gone into Titus' room enough to find the one in Nott manor, but she knew it existed— so it made sense he hunted for one.

Pushing the cloaks to the side, he crouched down, examining the backing without touching— probably to determine if it had any charms. Hermione bit her hand to prevent any noise. Though she knew he couldn't see her, she tried not to catch his stare as if it might make her visible to him, disconcerting to be so close.

“Ah, you missed some blood, Sprite.” He held up his hand as if to place it against the wood, but wisely didn't touch it, hovering mid-air, showing where she must have left a stain. “Don't force me to hunt you like this. I don't enjoy seeing you so afraid.” He paused and sighed. “You need to understand that it won't be long until Lucius gives us further authority to enter every crevice and hiding place in this manor, leaving you cornered. It would be better if you surrendered to me now.”

The words were meant to tempt her closer, but they repelled her. It gave her renewed energy to stand, hoping the barrier was soundproof.

She shouldn't have allowed herself to rest in the first place. Titus was right— there was nowhere safe in the whole manor. If she stayed, then in time she'd be discovered.

Hermione travelled the gradual slope of the stone tunnel, swiping away cobwebs, refusing to listen to Titus' empty promises.

Get past the pond. Find the gnome statue. Exit the manor grounds. Find Draco... Get back to the Order.

She repeated the steps in her mind to comfort herself.

---

The tunnels were chilly and uneven, causing her to stagger the whole time. She'd managed to cast a weak Lumos, hovering above her until the path abruptly ended. On the stone wall, there was a metal ladder, leading to a trap door above her head.

With only one available hand, she struggled on the ladder, almost slipping a time or two before pulling herself up with great effort.

Hermione hesitated at the top, pushing up the small door, revealing the vibrant flora of the greenhouse. She crawled out and winced at the creaking wooden floor, hoping no one was close enough to hear. Once fully inside, she collapsed on the floorboards, her face near a box of flies for the carnivorous vines.

She couldn't go on much longer. Eventually, she'd pass out from sheer exhaustion.

Though the sun already sank closer to earth, nearing dusk, sunshine still filtered through the smudged windows. She had to blink a few times to get used to the light, forcing herself to stand. From the first window, she spied the Eagle topiary near the rose gardens.

Her destination—the south pond—was a little further than she liked. To get there, she'd need to get through the hedge maze first.

Glancing around the greenhouse, she saw nothing but rows of plants, carefully irrigated and cared for by the elves. This hidden pocket of the grounds hadn't been searched yet, but that wouldn't be the case for long. Even if all she desired to do at this point was curl up beside the mandrakes and take a nice long nap, freezing in place would only lead to her being caught.

Stumbling forward, Hermione thought only of falling into the safety of Draco's embrace.

---

Hermione manoeuvred around the bushes and topiaries with stealth, hating for the millionth time how manicured it was. The elves really should stop taking so much care of it. The wild Nott gardens would have concealed her far better. As it stood, with every twist and turn she felt exposed, visible to the aurors flying on brooms in the distance and from the manor windows under the setting sun.

She had no energy left to complete wandless magic for any disguise. All she had to rely on now was her instincts.

Five minutes into her crawl through the maze, the distant sound of voices caused her to duck behind a hippogriff statue, back pressed into the concrete. She dared to peek around, seeing two aurors, both men with their masks on. If they continued on their path, they'd walk right by her, and she didn't think there was enough room to hide effectively.

They were still far enough away that she had time to think of something, but her brain felt like mush. She didn't know if she had the energy to fight anymore.

Their conversation boomed over the hedge maze, easy to hear.

"Look at this one," the shorter of the two said. "Imagine having so much money that you have an Ancient Grecian statue in the middle of a garden where no one can see. I swear it's not a fake."

"You're wasting time—and don't touch it! Boss wants all of the grounds covered on this side within the hour. They've already cleared the top floor. He wants us to scour the quidditch pitch next."

"A bloody quidditch pitch!" the other man spat in derision.

The taller man stopped his walk as if considering something. "I will admit that this is a lot of effort for a single muggleborn. Half the department will be here within a few hours."

“Did you see the footage? Exploded that man’s head like it was a ripened fruit, completely wandless. They’ll probably execute her.”

“Yeah, I saw it, but I doubt she's going to be killed. Maybe once she’s barren, but she’s going to have a line of these rich fuckers vying to claim her, so their heirs can inherit her talent. Nott will probably be first in line. If not, I bet she could be sold to the East for a healthy sum. Killing her would be a waste.”

The short one gave a nasally laugh. “They’d be skinned alive by Nott if they even offered. No cunt is worth his anger.”

“That’s true. Did you—” Both men screeched at the same time.

A flurry of white plumage was all she could see before things settled, revealing the aurors now several hedges back.

Al and Fred stood between Hermione and the aurors, bobbing their heads while giving warning trills. She didn’t know if they were standing in the path on purpose or not, but she’d always suspected Lucius had bred them with magical birds, leaving them far more intelligent than they should be.

“Merlin's balls, is that an albino peacock?” The short one exclaimed, as if that was his last straw.

Each time the men stepped forward, the peacocks hissed and flapped their wings threateningly, ready to attack. When the shorter auror attempted to kick Fred out of the way, Al attacked in a fury, fluttering forward, going for the man’s ankles, resulting in a gasp of pain.

The auror scrambled back, pointing his wand at Fred, but his partner stopped him.

“Stop being a fucking idiot! Those are Lucius Malfoy’s prize pets. Kill them, and he’d bury you. I wouldn’t risk *any* spells on them.”

“Look at the scratch it left. I’m bleeding.” He showed off his wounded ankle. “These little shits deserve an Avada.”

Hermione had never seen the peacocks be so vicious, even to Draco, who they had a vendetta against. If she ever got out of the manor and returned, she’d be sure to spoil them.

“If we can’t curse them, then how do we pass them? We’re on ground crew. We’re supposed to search this whole stupid maze without brooms.”

“Just walk past them very quickly,” the taller one suggested.

“Me? How about *you* walk past first?”

“Not a chance.”

They both stood in silence for a moment.



“Let’s come back to this path later. Maybe they’ll have wandered off by that point.”

“Good idea.”

Once they’d walked the opposite direction, Hermione took several gulping breaths, unable to manage the level of anxiety inside her. A part of her wanted to give up just to end it.

But she was so close. From her spot on the ground, she could see the pond, and if she squinted, she thought she might see a gnome statue, though she didn’t see an old oak tree.

She had to try. For Draco, she’d go on.

Despite being close to her destination, the trek there was slow as Hermione carefully darted between the bushes, inspecting each route as she went. The pain in her arm continued to get worse, until she grit her teeth with every movement.

She didn't confront any aurors on the way, though she did duck under cover when one flew over her. When the pond was finally in front of her, her heart sank, realising the danger.

By her estimation, she could get to the pond fine by hopping between the trees. But there was a giant empty field to navigate to get to the gnome— which was *much farther* than a stone's throw away.

Once she left this pond, she’d be exposed for an extended time. The sun was lower now, exploding into an array of orange and yellow along the horizon, but it still allowed enough light for this to be far too dangerous. One of the aurors on the brooms would certainly notice her running across, and she didn't have the magic to hide herself.

No, she needed the cover of darkness for this next step. Until then, she required a good place to hide so she wouldn’t be found.

Searching her environment, her eyes kept coming back to the pond, and she gasped when she remembered something. Reaching into her trousers, she extracted the breathing apparatus that Theo had gifted her for Christmas from the pouch strapped to her leg. She'd stuffed it into her bag on a whim, along with several other useful items, and now she was grateful she had.

She doubted anyone would think to look for her under the water.

Hermione gave a silent thank you to her brother before placing the device in her mouth and navigating her way to the pond. Once there, she let the water consume her.

---

Hermione sank to the bottom of the murky depths, and the weight of water pressed down on her like a comforting, cold blanket.

A wry part of her wanted to search for a waterbeast to pass the time. She’d scoured the Nott ponds for years for the creature, and it devastated her when Tabitha told her they were just a myth.

Hermione would have stayed in the watery silence for days, despite her aching wrist. But after an hour or so, the device in her mouth flashed red, warning the charm was deactivating soon. It only worked for a few hours at the most before needing to be renewed.

The bottom of the pond seemed a separate world from reality, a space in between, a bubble of safety. Hermione tested the limits of the device, letting her fingers prune further.

If she made it to Theo—

She'd think of that later. At the moment, she had no other choice but to emerge. Kicking her feet, she slowly drifted up, waiting until the device ran completely out. She allowed just her eyes to peek over the water.

Dark had descended since she'd been submerged into her water world. The stars blinked in their unending beauty, stretched out across the heaven. The moon gave its soft pale greeting.

And Titus Nott leaned against a tree near the pond, staring at her. He calmly took a drag of a lit cigarette, the tip glowing orange. "It's over, Sprite."

There was absolutely no escape now— magically and physically disabled, without a wand, in pain, and defenceless before one of the most powerful men in Great Britain.

She allowed her head to rise above the water. The shock of losing hope hadn't settled in her.

"How long have you been there?"

He shrugged. "Long enough."

"How did you find me?"

"A location spell."

That surprised her. Location spells notoriously took a long time to work and needed hair like polyjuice, which would be dissolved into a potion to use with the incantation. It disturbed her that Titus must have had some of her hair on hand.

Given the nature of the spell, she couldn't have hidden if she remained near him. The further she got away, the less the magic worked. But even if she'd made it to the gnome and beyond, it was still close enough that he'd have found her.

Hermione swam to the edge of the pond, struggling with her exhaustion and injury. It hurt badly enough now that she sobbed a few times. The water trailed off her as she staggered along the muddy bank, standing before him, feeling dizzy with panic, clothes sopping wet and sticking to her.

He took another drag of his cigarette and let his eyes trail from her feet to her head, as if he had all the time in the world.

"Why did you let me stay in the water so long?" she asked.

“The location spell showed that you were alive and breathing, so I decided you must need time to think.”

The adrenaline from earlier still buzzed through her, twisting into despair. Her vision went dark for a moment, and she swayed, her fatigue at the brink.

He straightened, brows furrowed, noticing that she was about to collapse.

“When did you start smoking?” It was an irrelevant question, but the sight of the muggle cigarette in his hand looked off.

“When you left.” He dropped the cigarette and rubbed it out with the toe of his boots. “I plan to stop soon. I won’t need them anymore.”

“You don’t have to arrest me,” she pleaded. The chilly air caused her to shiver. “You could help me. Dolohov will hurt me. Please don’t bring me—”

“I am helping you. You’ll see that in time.”

He took a step toward her, as if testing her response. But she didn’t run. Where would she go now? She might have an iron will, but her body remained human and weak, failing her constantly. It could only take so much injury and stress.

When she didn’t attempt to run, he hastened his steps forward. Hermione collapsed right before he got to her, and he caught her, lifting so her legs rested over one arm, and his other arm was under her back. She tried to arch away from him, but her head fell toward his chest, breathing in cinnamon and leather. A monster like him shouldn’t smell so good.

“I was so close.” Her throat tightened, eyes aching to shed tears. She’d never been so miserable in her life.

“I was impressed by how long you managed to evade me. Staying under the water was clever. Where did you even plan to go?”

She refused to answer that, but he already knew the answer would be back to Draco. He tightened his grip around her, though he didn’t question her deeper. She assumed that would be for later.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

“The events ahead will be walking a tightrope. You killed two wizards and maimed a third. This is no longer simple misbehaviour.”

Misbehaviour? As if she hadn’t defended herself. They’d deserved to die, and she’d never regret saving Julie or the little muggleborn.

“I wished I’d killed all of them. Every last one.”

Titus should be angry at that. She expected him to be after his serious tone, listing her offences. But instead, the edge of his lips lifted in a half smirk, as if he couldn’t help but be

amused.

“A year ago, I wouldn’t have imagined you’d be capable of impaling a man on a pole, but I’m starting to realise we’ve always been cut from the same cloth.”

The same? Did he think she’d so easily forget the camps? The women. The beatings. The scarecrow corpses.

Titus wasn’t her protector. He wasn’t her benevolent guardian, spoiling her with gifts and affection. He enforced unforgivable crimes, the blood of innocent people staining his hands. Everything he’d been to her was just an illusion. She’d only really known a small part of him that had been carefully crafted just for her.

Hermione wished to wipe away every gentle touch he’d ever given her, scrub it from her mind and body. Erase the fingerprints he’d left on her life, good and bad.

“I’m nothing like you, and I never will be.”

“That would be a good thing too, but it’s not true.”

---

Hermione didn’t remember falling asleep, but she woke up in a ministry cell, sitting up with a gasp.

Just under obsidian shackles, a raw line wrapped around her wrist where healers had magically sutured her hand back in her slumber. She suspected that it might scar, given how long it had been separated. Moving it carefully, she didn’t feel any pain except a single twinge.

“Mistress Hermione!”

“Bitty?” she asked in confusion, staring at her nanny elf with her floppy large ears, waiting patiently at her bedside. “What are you doing here?”

“Master told Bitty to watch mistress Hermione in case she needed anything.”

Lies. He left Bitty to monitor her movements.

The only thing Hermione truly needed was to be out of the cell.

She’d been placed in the same one as last time, dingy and cramped, except Titus had added a few creature comforts: a soft mattress, quality sheets, stacks of books, along with a platter of food and drinks.

He’d also changed her clothes in her sleep; she was wearing one of the casual dresses she’d left behind at Nott manor. She tried not to think of the implications as she searched her leg in dread, feeling nothing.

Shit. Titus had found her pouch—and everything she’d hidden in it. She leaned back with a hand to her forehead, trying not to panic.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“A few days. Master extended your rest so you could heal.”

“A few days!” Her wrist did seem more healed than it should be, giving evidence toward the time loss. “I think I need to be alone.”

“Bitty can’t leave Mistress Hermione while she’s injured.”

The little elf looked so hurt by the suggestion, it softened Hermione. None of this was Bitty’s fault.

“Of course not,” she agreed. A part of her wished to throw the platter in protest, knowing the source. How could she consume food grown with such a high human cost? But she needed the strength it provided, and it would be wasteful. “Could you get me something to eat?”

Bitty was ecstatic to be given a chore.

---

Hermione did nothing the whole day but wait in agitation. She refused to read the books, though she did spot a title or two that interested her, and she hated that he knew her well enough to pick the right ones. By the time Titus entered her cell, she trembled in repressed negative emotions, boiling up inside her, ready to overflow.

Titus took off his gloves and placed them in his cloak without saying a word, studying her. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she crossed her arms. Neither of them smiled.

“Thank you, Bitty. I can take it from here.”

The elf vanished instantly.

Titus conjured a chair and sat down, both hands pressed near his knees. “Did you enjoy your food? Eddy would be happy to make you—”

“No pleasantries. Get to the point.”

He leaned back and sighed, digging into his pocket, extracting a familiar white leather bracelet. “You shouldn’t be so careless with your gifts.”

Hermione stilled, and her arms uncrossed in shock.

Theo— he’d been back at his flat, so Titus must have connected some of the dots.

“Did you interrogate him—”

“Theo came to me yesterday while you were in St. Mungo’s. I know everything now. About Julie. About possibly going to the Order, though Draco never told him any information beyond that. Granted, I’d already suspected your involvement based on our conversation beforehand, but he solidified the details.”

The realisation was like a punch to the gut. "Theo told you—"

"He thought you were being arrested for Julie. He intended to help you, pleading with me to allow him to take the blame for it all. But all he did was add another crime under your belt. Lucky for you, this one I'll keep private. I intentionally never brought my suspicions to the ministry about Julie, investigating it alone, so I could help sweep everything under the rug."

"For a price." He wouldn't have helped her *sweep it under the rug* for free. He had an end goal.

"For a price," he agreed. "For now, I'll keep it quiet, because the murders are inflammatory enough, and I don't want Theo implicated."

Hermione clenched the fabric of her dress. "Did you punish him?"

"No." Titus glanced away. "I should have though. I'm too soft with the both of you. He—fuck, he helped a muggleborn escape, going along with your schemes, and he was communicating with an Order—"

"With the man he loved! Don't pretend that it wasn't your fault too."

Titus glared at her interruption and pinched his nose, as if to regain calm.

"I think you can make an educated guess about why I'm here and what I need from you. We both know you were with the Order. Dolohov wants an exchange of Order members for your life, so I require something new from you. A lead. *Anything*. The information will be extracted one way or another, but I intend to leave with everything you know. The only choice you have right now is whether you cooperate."

He wanted her to betray the Order. But if she did, Titus wouldn't show mercy. He'd execute everyone from sweet Luna to the dragon tamer. Despite her complicated feelings about Sirius, she couldn't condemn them all to slaughter. Not to mention, he'd bring back Julie and the little muggleborn, and all of her sacrifice would be worthless.

She built her mental defences, reviewing everything Draco had taught her, creating a sturdy bookcase, now slightly more advanced with several titles attached. "You'll have to rip my mind apart. I'm not giving you a thing."

There was a pregnant pause, as if he was unsure how to approach this.

"Hermione—"

"You lied to me about the camps."

He shifted in his seat. "How exactly? As I told you, the muggles choose to work there."

He couldn't talk his way out of it this time.

"You force women into prostitution."

“It's just an option for them. Would you rather I throw them in a prison? They're *criminals* and are treated far better than an average citizen scraping out a living in some hovel. Most of them don't want to leave, even after their sentence is completed.”

“They were never even given a trial. Is that where you obtained the woman who—”

"No. She was never in the camps."

None of his justifications made it better. "The workers are beaten bloody in the fields, and if they try to escape, they—" she found it hard to verbalise what she'd seen. "They murder them and make the others watch them rot. How is that not slavery, if they can't leave?"

Titus took a long time to answer before he stood up, clutching the leather bracelet, the chair vanishing as he did.

“You're trying to moralise survival. Would you rather we all starve? We're a fragile nation in a fragile world, and people require a reliable source of food. Do you want to know what humans would resort to eating if they couldn't find anything else? I'm not sure you could stomach the truth." He placed a closed fist to his chest, walking close to her, eyes bright with fury. "Call me a monster, and it might be true. I do *necessary* monstrous things to keep the ones I love fed and protected from a savage world. Otherwise, we'd have chaos. Right now, we're the most stable country in the cursed zones because of *my* efforts.”

He was right—the world was fragile, and it might be worse without the order he'd imposed. But he was also wrong. There had to be a better way than the camps and slavery. She doubted the purebloods even tried to think of one. They'd rather see muggles as beasts of burden.

He grabbed her wrist— her injured one. She thought of struggling, but didn't see the point as he strapped the leather bracelet back on. “Planning to track me?”

“Unfortunately, my original charms have been tampered with by goblins hired by Malfoy and can't be fixed. But it can still track your heart rate and notify me if you're in danger, and that's enough for me, especially when you insist on being reckless with your life.”

She hated the sensation of it wrapped around her wound, even if it didn't hurt.

“Stand up,” he ordered.

“No.”

“Maybe Dolohov was right. I shouldn't have spoiled you like I did.” He yanked her up by her shoulders, turning and pressing her against the solid wall.

She'd forgotten his intimidating size until it enveloped her. It required no effort for him to physically subdue her. Suddenly afraid, she attempted to turn her face to the side, but he tugged it back into position with a firm jerk on her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“I'll try my best to be gentle,” he whispered. “But since you insist on resisting me, this will probably hurt.”

Without warning, he placed his wand to her temple and rammed into her mind. Too fast and rough. She fought against him, finding it incredibly uncomfortable, bordering on painful, but he kept her secure with both hands now on her head.

Once inside, Titus ran a phantom hand down the displayed books on her library shelf like a loving caress—the only protection left.

"I don't want to destroy this." In the physical world, his lips lingered next to her ear, whispering low, almost seductive. "Let me in."

"Break through, and I'll never forgive you. My hate will be unending."

"Then hate me." Titus waited, and when she didn't surrender, the hold on her head tightened. "But you'll be alive to do so."

He slammed into her carefully curated books. She gave a shocked cry at the sudden assault. But he didn't let up, battering into it again and again until her pathetic shelves crumbled one book at a time. She tried to rebuild the shelves to no avail. She now understood Draco had been *gentle* with his education as Titus brutally cracked the shelf in two with expert blows. Her growing headache burst with pain in tandem, as if he'd stabbed a knife into her temple.

"Stop!" she cried in agony, but the whole shelf crumbled into nothing. She didn't even know if it could ever be rebuilt into what it had been again. Her eyes rolled back; she almost fainted from the enormous pressure.

"The worst is over," he tried to soothe, brushing a thumb along her jaw. He rifled through her memories at a fast pace, forcing her thoughts to focus on the initial escape with Julie. Then he slowed down to an agonising crawl, reviewing each scene twice. She screamed and sobbed, struggling to get away, begging him to leave her alone, but he continued with ruthless efficiency. When he watched her take the polyjuice to turn into him, his grip tightened again. "Devious as a snake, stealing my hair."

After she landed in Nottingham, he stopped for a long time, watching her Imperio Travers.

"That was you?" he said in disbelief and then in acceptance. "Of course, it was you."

As precise as if he used a blade, he obliterated the memory from her mind. Her vision flashed bright white, and he held her trembling body close against his chest in the confusing aftermath.

"I'm going to vomit." He let her go, and she retched in the corner. He held back her hair, while keeping her from collapsing, and cleaned her up after, using a charm to freshen her mouth.

"Are you okay?" he asked once she straightened, wiping her trembling lips.

"You stole—" She couldn't quite remember, but she knew it had to be important. "You stole it from me!" He'd messed with her mind. One of her greatest fears, and he did it without a second thought, as if discarding rubbish.



“It’s for the best,” he whispered. “The men you murdered were just guards, easily replaceable, but there’d be no forgiveness for— the other.”

Anger exploded inside her. She wanted Draco so badly she could taste the desire on her tongue. He’d never take a memory from her unless she asked him to.

So focused on Draco, on the comfort of him, that when Titus tried to dive back into her memories, she accidentally dredged up the memory of her first kiss. In the astronomy, after dancing under the moonlight, lips pressed gently—

Titus tugged out as if touching fire, unwilling to study the tender moment. He gently shook her shoulders with an expression of revulsion. “Don’t fucking show me something like that again.”

Without giving her time to recover, he pressed back heavily in a way that made her ill, unravelling her mind by pulling loose strings. This time he began at the end, so that he didn’t irritate the section he obliterated, painfully going through her time at the camp, and then with Harry in the tunnels. He didn’t linger long on their discussions, except when she went to her father’s desk.

"We'll go over this moment in depth later," he said. "But it’s not important now."

When he got to Charlie and his dragon, he stayed the longest. Maybe it was the little boy in him that wished to be a knight, going on adventures, breathing fire down on monsters.

But she suspected something else in the conversation intrigued him too, going over it four times— something vital, she realised.

She needed to do everything possible to make him stop before he got to anything more incriminating. The last time she’d brought up the images accidentally, but she wondered now if she could force her thoughts through on purpose. While she couldn’t make him get out of her head, she could make it— unpleasant.

Before he could get to the other Order base memories, she pressed a second memory forward.

---

“Ready or not, here I come,” Draco warned. They played their usual games. He chased her in the library as she squealed and laughed, racing around tables, until he caught her, shoving her back against the shelves, lifting her legs to wrap along his hips. “You’re so predictable.”

“Maybe I want you to find me.” She gently bit his neck, marking him. “Maybe I’ve been aching for you to touch me all day.”

"Is that so?" Draco grinned, his hand inching up her dress to her knickers. "You need me to relieve your aching p—"

---

Titus tugged out of her mind again with a growl, chest heaving up and down, glaring at her, still pressed against her. He didn't even try to hide what he was feeling. It was written all over his face.

Jealous— she'd made him seethingly jealous.

He wanted it for himself, squealing and laughing, chasing each other around, just begging to be caught and touched.

But even if she'd chosen Titus, she doubted she'd have been playful with him. Not like that. Their relationship had too many complicated layers to be considered fun, and his nature was too serious.

"Stop," he demanded, but it sounded more like a plea.

But she wouldn't.

When he entered her mind again, he went straight to Sirius— her first meeting with him. The tattoos of the stag and the moon and the black dog.

Now that Hermione knew she could distract him, she refused to allow him one more stolen memory.

With all her concentration, she thought of something that would hurt him the most, an intentional knife to the chest, switching Sirius to Draco in her mind.

---

The memory shifted to the master bedroom in Malfoy manor.

Red covers were rumpled under them as she fucked Draco, head back in pleasure, clutching her breasts, each roll of her hips forward ripping little noises from both of them. They'd been edging for a long time, their skin flushed and heated. Every touch of her clit only a teasing torture. It was pure desperation as she grabbed his shoulders, finally orgasming with a long moan. Collapsing forward, she kissed him gently, and Draco paused to enjoy her sated expression, long fingers stroking her back.

"Keep going. It still feels so good," she urged. Draco obeyed, holding her hips, while thrusting up into her. "I want to feel your come inside—"

---

"Bloody fuck!" Titus ripped out of her mind and tossed her aside. She felt woozy and ill with the jolting movement, stumbling to her mattress with a headache throbbing across her skull.

Titus paced before her, furious, shoving the palms of his hands into his eyes, as if he could erase what he'd seen if he pressed hard enough.

Once he calmed himself, he walked back toward her with a grim expression, intent on continuing the assault on her brain. "You can't deter me."

“I’ll show you how I like to suck his cock next,” Hermione warned. “I swear to Merlin I will. That’s your little fantasy, right? Me on my knees before you. Do you want to see how good I am at it now? Draco likes it when—”

"No more!" He lunged toward her, as if to grab her. She flinched on instinct, scrambling away from him toward the wall on the far side of the bed.

At her retreat, he paused, seeing her shivering, hands up to protect herself. “Sprite,” he whispered. “Fuck, don’t be scared. Not of me. I wasn’t going to hit you. I’d never do that.” He tried to touch her arm to soothe her, and she jolted away again, causing him to lower his hand.

“Of course, I’m scared of you. What did you think would happen after this?”

He’d torn into her mind, causing permanent injury. Her body remained tense as a harp string, preparing for him to approach again.

It was his turn to flinch. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes for a moment, seeming in pain.

“What I did today was necessary— don’t look at me like that. I can’t stand it. I’d never truly hurt you, even if you drive me into madness.” He paced a little more, before sighing. “Very well, we’re done for today. I’m not sure I can handle any more of this either, and I might have enough information already.”

What did he mean by that? Her heart beat pulsed across her body, still fearful he’d finish what he began.

Titus paused before opening the cell door, placing his hand against the metal bars.

"Seeing you with him like that—" his stare turned cold. "You meant it to hurt me, and you succeeded. If it wouldn’t damage your mind, I’d erase every single fucking memory of him. I’d oblivate you until all you knew was me again. And he’d deserve the agony of seeing you in my arms. Malfoy stole you, then poisoned you against me—"

"Don’t blame him. You’ve done that all by yourself!"

He jerked open the cell door in anger. “When I come back, I’m going to search the rest of your memories, and you’ll give them to me freely.”

“And if I don’t?”

Titus planned to butcher everyone she’d met at the base, everyone she’d become friends with, and string their body parts along the streets.

Seamus and his makeshift pub, always welcoming. The newly married couple, so happy in their bliss. Charlie and his dragon. Even Maryam. Innocent blood would drip from her hands if she allowed him one more second in her mind.

“You’ve always been obstinate,” Titus warned in a low voice. “And I never wanted to break your spirit. But if you refuse to give me what I need, then I will not be so gentle anymore.” His jaw clenched so hard she thought he might break it. “I have some important errands. Rest and recover, Sprite. I’ll be back when I finish my task. For your sake, you need to hope I’m successful.”

Titus fled the cell, cloak billowing behind him.

Hermione leaned over, pressed her face into the mattress, and screamed.

---

The next morning, everything ached: her mind, her heart, her muscles, her wrist. Hermione would have been content to melt into the mattress for eternity, but the tap of boots down the corridor forced her up, worried that Titus had finally come back to finish the assault on her mind— or maybe it was Dolohov. She shuffled to the corner of her bed, as far as possible from the door.

When the noise got closer, she realised it was two sets of footsteps and they were headed past her. It wasn’t until the door to the cell next to her opened that she managed a good look at the people ducking inside.

Draco flicked his head up, eyes meeting hers under the blond strands. He flashed her a quick smirk, teeth stained with blood, and her heart did flip flops, body vibrating with happiness and dread.

Crimson splattered in various locations around his body, and he had a split lip and crooked nose, his hair bedraggled and dripping red droplets. Obsidian wrapped around his wrists too, connected in the middle by a heavy chain.

“You’re holding me so close that I think you’re starting to like it,” Draco teased the guard.

“Shut the fuck up.” The guard dragged him to the corner and with a flick of his wand, attached the shackles to a hook, stretching Draco’s arms from the force. “I’m getting very tired of you.”

“Chains too— how did you know they’re my favourite?”

“I’ll gladly bring you to the lower levels with the real criminals, if that’s what you want. They’d have fun with a pretty boy like you.”

“So you *do* think I’m pretty. I was starting to think that you only liked me for my money.”

“Your galleons are only barely worth this aggravation. Do you know what I’m risking by placing you here?”

“Quite a bit more than you realise, but you’ll still pocket the gold, won’t you?”

The auror risked Titus’ wrath for playing into Malfoy games. He glared at Draco, and then gave a grunt, agreeing with him. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Two hours, or you won’t receive the second payment.”

Again, the auror hesitated. “That’s more than—”

“Two hours,” Draco demanded in an icy tone.

“Two,” the man said slowly, glancing between her and Draco.

Hermione somehow held her tongue until the auror walked back out of the cell, leaving them alone. She never broke eye contact with Draco. Once alone, he dropped his occlumency, allowing her— and only her— to see the worry he’d hidden.

She wandered to the bars that separated them, trying to get as close as possible, wishing she could walk through them.

“Hello, Granger,” he broke the silence. Dangling from the chains like that must be hurting him.

“Draco—” the word caught in her throat. “How did they catch you?”

He managed to smirk again with his split lip. “Catch me? Do you really think so low of me? I let them arrest me on purpose, love.”

“You shouldn’t have. It’s too dangerous.”

“If you get to run into danger every second without my consent, then perhaps I get a choice when to risk my life too.”

He was right. It wasn’t fair. Guilt overwhelmed her, feeling responsible for his incarceration, even if he insisted that he volunteered to be here.

Hermione gripped the bars. “So you have a plan?”

Draco wouldn’t have followed her here without one, but she needed it to be confirmed.

“Several.”

With great strength, he did a pull up, lifting his entire upper body until his head was level with his shackles. The obsidian dug into his skin, as he placed his hands to his lips, spitting something out— small and circular, and it clicked on contact with the metal. The shackles opened, releasing him. When he landed on his feet, the Black family key rested in the palm of his hand.

The sight almost made her knees buckle in relief.

“Draco,” she cried, as he made his way over. He slipped both arms through the bars and tugged her close. Their lips connected in a searing kiss, desperately clinging to each other. She tasted the metallic tang of his blood, revelling in his comforting scent.

Being in his arms felt like home.

But then his hand curled into her hair at the base of her skull, tugging her head back gently so she could see his glare. He didn't say anything at first, eyes sliding across the planes of her face, giving a dark look.

"What did you fucking do?"

She told him everything. From the moment she landed in Nottingham— the sections missing from her memory— to Bromley house, the Order, the Camps, and then getting caught.

When she mentioned the portkey, he stopped her.

"What do you mean it didn't work? That's impossible."

She shrugged. "I'm not sure what happened."

Draco seemed disturbed by the revelation, as if he couldn't solve the puzzle— something that rarely happened.

"Perhaps the Order tampered with it."

"Maybe."

He furrowed his brow while listening to the rest. By the end, he'd closed his eyes, hand firmly in her hair, body as close as possible, keeping himself absolutely still.

"I had to help—"

"I'm trying to control myself, you infuriating witch. I have a great desire to strangle Potter at the moment— more than usual. The two of you together was bound to be a reckless disaster." He took a deep breath. "Was it worth it? The girl— for all of this."

She hesitated, evaluating. "Yes."

Maybe in the grand scheme of things, one muggleborn girl wasn't worth saving. Maybe it would all lead to nothing, her efforts wasted. But the image she conjured of the girl in the little school room, beside her peers, learning to read and write— something that would have been denied her— gave her a deep comfort. At least one time in her life, she'd done something truly good.

She wouldn't apologise for saving Julie or the girl. It was the only thing that made her situation bearable.

"If I'd let her leave to the ministry, I wouldn't have just failed her, Draco, I would've failed myself too. I would've failed the little girl that lives inside my own heart— the one torn from my dead father and placed in a stranger's home at their mercy. They planned to give her to the bloody Carrows. Was I supposed to just let them take her away?"

He turned the new information over in his mind, before releasing her, leaning their foreheads together. "The Carrows would've been very cruel to her. You're right, there's no use for me to get angry. It's a selfish desire to keep you safe, conflicting with your nature to protect the

innocent. We can't change what's happened, but it's put us in a bind. We only have two options going forward."

"Which are?"

"The Order or exile."

Hermione searched his expression, knowing he wasn't telling her the whole truth. "What's the catch?"

"If we go to the safe house, we might never be able to go out again. There would be no excursions. We'd be trapped there forever."

That sounded terrible, worse than being stuck at Nott manor. An unlivable future. They'd have each other, but they'd have nothing else. What kind of life would that be, waiting for the mist to encroach?

Draco visibly swallowed, stroking her cheek, and she braced herself for bad news.

"What else?"

"If you go to the Order, you'd go alone."

"What?" Hermione tugged back from him.

"Sirius won't let me join, even if I give him a vault. Not without me proving my loyalty. He's too principled, though Weasley tried to convince him. We met several times in an old Black property to discuss terms, and he never wavered from his stance. I didn't quite... get along with my cousin. I think I remind him too much of my father. And what he wants from me might be impossible to achieve. I'm prepared to let you go—"

"No, I don't want to be separated from you. I'd rather choose exile. We go together or not at all."

He paused, thinking.

"Exile it is." He gave a soft smile and seemed relieved, as if he'd hoped she'd choose that. "My father warned me about what was going to happen—"

"Your father knows your plans?" Hermione remembered the way Lucius glared at her. "I don't think—"

"I told him that I'd forgive him if he helped me. He owes me a sliver of happiness for all the misery he put me through, because I don't think I could live long in this shitty world without you. I could barely stand it before you. What would be the point? Also, I promised we'd... start trying for a baby as soon as we're free and safe."

If Lucius loved only one person in the entire world, it would be his only son. Even then, promising an heir might be the only thing that could sway him.

“What do you have planned?”

Grabbing her hand, he placed the key inside of her palm, curling her fist around it.

“Hide this,” he said. “Once Nott gets back, and Dolohov gives his okay, he’s going to take you to the Wizengamot.”

“The Wizengamot!”

Draco held her close. “In the courtroom, Nott will argue to take you back, and my father will argue to keep you with me. But— my father will lose. It’s already been determined. He didn’t have enough sway in the ministry compared to Nott. The charges were too damning.”

Hermione suspected that to be the planned course of events, but to hear it out loud made her stomach turn over on itself.

“Then what?”

“Nott will then ask the audience if anyone wants to compete against him for you at an official Trial.” He shook his head. “No one will, Granger. Not a single soul would dare. Krum’s rumoured death will scare them away, even if others want to claim you. He’s too powerful to go up against. The Wizengamot *will* return you to him as his breeder.”

She shook her head, biting her tongue to prevent from sobbing.

“Don’t despair. You won’t even make it back to his manor. My father has placed a black galleon in the fountain in the atrium— one of the last portkeys that we own. When you get close, I want you to unlock your shackles with the key and escape with it. Kill if you must to get there. Do whatever you need to do. It will bring you to a cottage we own in France. My father destroyed the records, making it untraceable, so no one will know about—”

“But what about you?” Hermione reached up and touched his lips, avoiding his wound. If everything went wrong, she’d be in a foreign country by herself, trapped forever without him.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll always find my way back to you.”

She kissed him again, wishing to soak in it, memorising every touch he’d ever given her.

“I need to get back in my shackles soon,” he whispered, but he groaned against her lips, betraying his calm exterior.

“Not yet,” she begged. “Give us a few more moments. I don’t want to be separated.”

“Granger—” He lifted her chin. “*Nothing* in this universe can keep me from you. Do you understand that? We’re connected now, soul to soul, and I’d find that invisible string in the dark and follow you across the world, if I had to. You’re the shape of tea leaves left on the bottom of my cup, the only answer in the divination of my future.” He forced her to look at him. “And I promise you right now, even with an unbreakable vow, that I’ll destroy anyone or anything that tries to stand between us.”



“Even death?”

“I’d kill the Reaper if he tried, and then I’d raise an army of inferi to come for you.”

Hermione didn’t believe in divination, but she did believe that when Draco Malfoy promised her something, he meant it.

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: loss of limb

Song Suggestion: Bad Omens- "The Death of Peace of Mind"

# Chapter 45: The Spider's Web

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Florence + The Machine– “Which Witch” AND xxxtentation– “Revenge”

A million thank yous to my wonderful beta, MyPrivateInsanity, and my alpha group. I would have missed so many little plot holes and mistakes without them!

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

## The Spider's Web

Hermione held on to Draco through the cell bars until she grew fatigued and slid to the ground. He followed, cradling her jaw, stroking along her skin as if starved for her touch.

She couldn't help but ruminate. "What if your father—"

"He wants us to reconnect. I'd never forgive him if he didn't help me with this. More than that — it would cross a line for me, and we'd never return to what we were— what he wants. I don't like to put trust in him, especially after he lied about the ritual, but— don't let anything he says at the trial make you doubt. When you get to the atrium, he's bribed a man to come and talk to Titus, giving you a distraction to act."

A part of Draco would always be the boy clinging to his father in the graveyard, a desperate hope for paternal love. And maybe there would always be a part of Lucius clinging to his son, wishing to give him the remnants of the world.

"What if I can't get to the galleon?"

"Then we'll go to plan B. One that I didn't tell my father about." He paused and frowned. "Because it's a weekend, all of the main floos in the atrium will be closed. I paid a janitor to turn one on, cordoning it off with tape, pretending it's undergoing maintenance. The powder will be in a jar on the ground. Go to the manor first, so that they can't track you. From there, floo directly to 12 Grimmauld Place."

He'd created the contingency plan not only for if the first went awry, but in case his father didn't hold up his end of the bargain.

She didn't recognise the location.

"Is that your property?"

"No, but you know the owner and have been promised safe access."

Hermione noticed his rigid stance. "You don't like this option."

"I don't," he admitted. "But it's better than being caged to Nott."

Each option carried too many risks, too many things that could go wrong.

"I have to get back into my chains soon before anyone returns," he warned.

"I know."

But they kept holding each other. Hermione didn't want to let go, afraid she'd never be able to touch him again, despite his promises.

But eventually, they had to untangle themselves. She grasped at his shirt to tug him back, but he clutched her wrists, kissed them, and pulled away. Walking back to the chains, he reattached the shackles, letting himself hang in an uncomfortable position.

---

Mipsy arrived with lunch and then an early dinner before she heard the familiar tap of boots down the darkened corridor.

Having nowhere to store the key, she placed it under her tongue. It tasted sharp and burned slightly, and she hoped she didn't accidentally swallow it.

Draco held her desperate stare. Only when Titus loomed in front of her cell door did she manage to rip away her gaze.

The Butcher's face was flushed, sweat running in rivulets down his throat to his cloak line, dark curls plastered to his neck. "What the fuck is Malfoy doing here?"

No one answered his question and irritation rolled off him. He glanced between them with suspicion.

"Bribing your way into chains to be close to her is a very... interesting move." He tilted his head in thought, opening the door to her cell. It creaked on its hinges as he stepped inside. "I should be angry, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I hope you both took the time to process the inevitable separation."

The rattle of the door closing almost made her jump, and she pressed her nails further into the mattress, sitting on the edge, both feet pressed to the stone floor.

She refused to meet his eyes as walked over and lifted her chin.

"Come to rape my mind again?"

He tugged away like her skin burned. There was blood on his wrists, dried just above his gloves.

"I'll ignore your biting tone." He hesitated and sighed. "It won't be necessary to look through your memories. Not today. I've gotten what I need for now. The rest can be obtained when

you're less volatile."

A moment of relief washed over her, followed by a sinister premonition of things unsaid.

Whose blood stained his wrist?

"Where have you been?" she asked.

A cut on his cheekbone shone under the orange overhead light.

"Cleaning up an infestation."

Scenarios played out in her mind, each worse than the next. She thought she might have heard the echo of screams, the ghosts haunting his steps.

And she also knew he wouldn't answer her questions.

"It's time to go, Sprite. I'll even allow you to say goodbye to Malfoy— through the bars, of course."

Hermione wished to destroy something precious to him, just so he knew how it felt. To console herself, she rolled the key around with her tongue, imagining the moment of escape.

"And if I fight you? Would you force me?"

"Hermione— I don't enjoy seeing you like this. If there was a way for this to play out differently—"

"Don't lie to her." Draco dangled from the chains, hands discoloured from blood loss, eyes focused on Titus through his blond fringe. "Stop pretending you're not enjoying the situation, even her pain. You've been fantasising your revenge for so long you'd fuck this moment if you could."

Titus' hand clenched into a fist by his side, and his expression shuttered. He straightened to his full height and walked out of her cell with precision, dragon hide boots clicking against the stone, and entered Draco's, only stopping when they were eye to eye.

They glared at each other for a long time, neither backing down.

"I told my aurors that if you resisted arrest, they were allowed to beat you." Titus stood with his feet apart, hands locked behind his back— his usual stance of power— entirely comfortable in his authority. "I only wish I could have done it myself."

Draco grinned with his split lip. One of his eyes had already begun to blacken with a bruise. His mask had snapped into place long ago.

Draco stayed silent. The lack of response didn't bother Titus. In this environment, with the stone walls and muted light, far underground, stripped of anything soft, the Butcher was in his element.

"I bet you think you could withstand my usual torture?" Titus gave an answering grin, white teeth flashing in the dim atmosphere. "But I've destroyed tougher men than you. After I'm finished with them, they can never be put back together, both body and mind. It's too bad I can't show you what I'm capable of, but your daddy saved you again."

"So you obey my daddy too?"

Titus took out his favoured knife, infused with dark enchantments—the same knife he'd used to carve Blaise. It had been a family relic, and Titus kept it close for both practical and sentimental reasons. The cuts from the blade rarely healed well, unless the master willed it. He placed the razor-sharp tip next to Draco's jugular, close enough to be a threat, but he didn't pass the skin barrier.

Hermione shoved down her desire to save him, knowing any involvement from her would make it worse.

"If I could, I think I'd take your tongue first." Titus ghosted the blade along his skin. "Your father was so worried for his only son. He'd have done *anything* for your freedom, but we settled on a deal. A rather forgiving one. Dolohov ordered financial restitution paid toward the affected families from Hermione's attack, and Lucius cleared out an entire Gringotts vault for it."

Titus left out the rest of the deal on purpose, but they all knew what it entailed.

The tip of the knife now pressed into the hollow of his throat right above his bone, and a single drop of blood trailed down into his shirt.

"You should kill me now."

"Tempting. I've never wanted someone's death more."

"If you take her from me, I'll never stop hunting you." Draco looked cold and calm. "You'll never be able to rest, always sleeping with one eye open. You'll see then what *I'm* capable of."

Titus ripped away the knife, flipping it once and catching the hilt, as if toying with the idea of stabbing.

"Always such an arrogant fuck. Didn't I warn you that one day the big dog would rip out your throat? You should lick your wounds and stop instigating fights, because the next serious snap at me will be your last." Titus tucked his knife back inside its sheath. "You're right though. While I don't wish for Hermione to suffer, seeing you in chains pleases me. Even with your father's deal, I think I'll let you hang there until the agony helps you understand that you've lost. And if that doesn't work, I can always employ other... methods."

As if to dismiss him, Titus began to walk out the cell.

"She'll never love you again," Draco taunted at his back. "Even if you get everything you think you want, you won't get that."

"Is that what you believe?" He scoffed. "Her love is strained right now, but once she gets over her anger toward me, she'll seek the comfort and safety I provide, as she always has. I'll have every part of her again, including her heart." His blue eyes sparked under the light as he spared one glance back, relishing every word. "So on a lonely night sometime soon, when you're in bed getting your cock sucked by some whore, crying pathetically while imagining the taste of her, just know I'll be thoroughly enjoying everything you've lost."

Draco slammed forward, chains rattling as he stretched them as far as he could go. The iron mask broke once, exposing a dark expression underneath, something slightly insane. He sucked in a deep breath to regain control of himself.

"Do you know how I'm certain you'll never have her back?" Draco lowered his voice. "Because you don't fucking understand her, and you never will. What she needs are things you're incapable of giving. The person you think she is doesn't even exist."

Titus didn't turn around to respond, but what Draco said bothered him. He twisted his head side to side as if stretching before a fight. "As the saying goes, time heals all wounds. While you were her first, I *will* be her last. I can be a very patient man, especially for her. You're in her past now, Malfoy. A distant dream. And after today, I'll make sure you never see her again, except in my arms."

Draco's expression snapped closed with occlumency, but his stare remained cold. A ripple of tension travelled down Titus' jaw as he slammed the cell door behind him, returning to hers. The metal rattled as he unlocked it.

"Get up, Sprite," he bit out. "I've changed my mind. You're not allowed to say goodbye. There's no point. It's time to go."

One look at Draco and Hermione translated his quick glance. *Go with the plan.*

She'd do it for him— for all that he risked getting her to safety. She trusted that he'd find a way back to her, linked by fate. It might be scary and possibly lonely waiting for him to join her in exile, but it would be better than any life in store for her in Great Britain.

---

Titus led her through the darkened corridors, one hand on the small of her back, a warning more than comfort. Due to it being a weekend, the route remained empty of people.

The heavy silence added to her disquiet.

"My shackles are hurting me." They'd been chafing her since the morning.

"You should have considered that before killing someone," he snapped back, anger leaking out through his usual calm, much greater than she'd ever seen before. Even through his fury, he reached down and tapped her wrists with his wand, casting a cushioning charm. She resisted twisting them in relief.

"Where are you bringing me?"

"To the Wizengamot."

She didn't have to pretend surprise or dread. Even knowing ahead of time, the confirmation twisted her gut into knots.

"What's the point of the trial? I already suspect you've rigged it in your favour."

"There are still rules to obey, even on a surface level."

Hermione thought Titus would bring her to the courtroom, but instead he led her up the lift and into an empty interrogation room. The familiar cold metal table and chairs greeted her.

"I thought you said we'd go to the courtroom?"

"It's just a short detour."

She tried to dig her feet in, but he pushed her forward, and she stumbled into the room.

"There will be no more disobedience today," he warned. "Or I'll be forced to publicly discipline you. Do you understand?"

She did.

Hermione would need to tamp down her rage to get through this, comforting herself with her future escape.

Showing she could follow orders when it suited her, Hermione walked to one of the chairs and lowered herself slowly. Placing her wrists on the table with a clink, she swished the key to her cheek so she could talk. "Would you really punish me publicly?"

He ran a hand along his face. Once again, she noticed the blood on his wrist. It left dark crimson trails past the sleeves of his uniform.

"I would take no pleasure in it. Nor would I go past what's necessary. And afterward, I would heal you and then thoroughly make it up to you. But yes, I'd punish you, if I was ordered to."

Though she knew he could, the admittance stung— his capability to hurt her.

His eyes stuck on her trembling hands, brow furrowed. He probably thought the shivers were from fear instead of rage, because his expression softened.

"They won't punish you this time, even with the severity of your crimes. Not if you follow my orders. I've already made my deals and sacrifices too. So just let me lead today. Give me your trust, and I promise everything will work out okay. While you may forever lose your full access to magic, if I feel I can trust you, I plan to eventually upgrade your shackles from obsidian to a neutral metal. There's nothing to fear from our future."

The hypothetical nightmare he painted weighed on her, as if shoving her into a box she couldn't fit inside.

Titus tapped his wand against his thigh in agitation.

"The courts need to be convinced that you're not a threat, and that might require sacrifices from you as well. You won't like what's to come, but it must be done. To them, you're only worth as much as you produce. Successfully birthing a pureblood heir might have given you more leverage, but at the moment, your worth is only in your potential. The trial will just be to assuage the Wizengamot that I'm fully capable of handling you."

His logical evaluation of the situation was correct, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered. Not Titus' affection. Not the court's decision. They could rip her choice from her clenched hands, but she could never be a domicile house pet again.

Not when she'd been shown she could be *more*.

---

Just as Hermione began to fidget in her seat, Dolohov entered the room, striding forward confidently in dark robes, with the sleeves pulled up to show the twisted skull tattoo on his left forearm, signifying his status as an original Death Eater. He gave a single nod to Titus before taking the seat across from her.

As he had the first time, he tugged out his knotty, pale wand and placed it in front of him on the cold metal table. A distinct threat. "I need to talk to Hermione... privately."

Titus hesitated a moment too long, standing as if petrified, hand hovering over where he'd stashed his wand. She noticed the subtle movement, but Dolohov didn't take his eyes off her.

"I won't injure your beloved pet, Nott, but she needs a *stern* warning. Something to think about if she ever decides to go feral again. It will only be a few minutes."

Titus still hesitated. He obviously didn't want to leave her alone with the man examining her, but eventually he squeezed her shoulder in reassurance. When the door clicked shut behind him, Dolohov's gaze roved across her features, reminding her of Draco while strategizing. There was nothing behind his stare, no anger, no happiness, just cold calculation.

"You're fortunate the blood you shed on your rampage was of no importance, or this meeting would be far more painful."

She met his stare and said nothing, though she had to fight an odd instinct to lower her gaze.

A swish of his wand, and his dark patronus dogs prowled around the room. One perched by his side, the other panted down her neck with icy gusts. Dolohov played with the wisps of shadow beside him, still thinking. Her instincts lurched with fear, remembering the feel of the shadow teeth tearing into flesh, ripping down to bone. The unending suffocation.

Despite attempting to be unaffected, she moved her wrists, just slightly, a subtle screech of shackles across metal. He glanced at them and grinned, winning a silent battle, knowing he scared her.



"I assume you're wondering why I even keep you alive, since I've promised you death. Your crimes were far more egregious than last time."

"I have wondered," she whispered.

He picked up the wand and rolled it in his fingers. She wondered about other things too—first among them, why Titus, the most dangerous man in Great Britain, bowed to Dolohov's authority. On the surface, the Death Eater seemed ordinary. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Average height. Not handsome. Not ugly. He'd disappear into a crowd, yet Titus obeyed him. It made no sense on the surface.

Dolohov tilted his head to the side as if he could read her thoughts.

"Even the most unlikely creatures can prove more important than they first appear. You see, society functions on a strict structure. Each person plays a part to keep things stable, and not everyone gets the choice on which duty they must perform. While yours was once straightforward, now it holds much more weight. Can you guess how?"

He didn't want her to know. He wanted to inform her. The dog's teeth reminded her to play the game.

"I can't," she answered.

"Titus Nott had the intelligent foresight to make himself *indispensable* to me. No one else can curtail the Order or control the muggles as efficiently as him." Dolohov drummed his long fingers against the metal, showing slight irritation. "But since you've been gone from his life, his impeccable work ethic has waned. He's distracted, making careless mistakes. To me, his desire for you is disgusting, immoral, and a weakness, but I understand we all have our vices. Even Achilles had his tender heel. Who am I to judge? In the end, I only need him to be content, so that he continues with his good work. And that's where *you* come in."

The dark patronus placed its canines along her throat, and the nerves prickled underneath. She froze with the proximity, pulse fluttering.

"He argued for your worthless life. Told me that Draco Malfoy was young, easily led astray by a strong-willed witch. That you just needed a *heavier*, more experienced hand. Someone that knows you. In his care, you weren't so rebellious. The points were sound. Perhaps he's right. I've granted you your life, and from now on, you'll honour that by fulfilling your duty to society, whether you like the role or not. Give him a son, suck his cock, pretend you love him. I care not how you do it, but you *will* make him happy."

"And if I don't?" Hermione couldn't help but ask. The shadow dog's teeth bit down harder. Currents of pain raced down her neck and through her limbs. She silenced an agonised gasp by pressing her lips tightly together.

"Killing you would only turn Titus against me— a very foolish move when he's so useful, potentially destabilising the strict structure. However, if you insist on continuing to be obstinate, I will have to take more drastic measures. Next time we face each other at this table, I'll take a finger. And then the next time, your others. Your toes. Your hands. Your

arms. Your eyes. And if that doesn't work, I'll carve up one of your friends in front of you. I'll even let you choose the limb I dismember— or maybe I'll even force you to do it yourself." His gaze turned sharp as knives. "Tell me when I should stop."

Her panic rose inside her at the image he conjured. Body parts sliced away on a whim, butchered for daring to want anything more out of her life. For helping her friends and innocent people. Her vision darkened, the sensation of falling and drowning as the teeth of the dogs continued to gnaw on her skin. But the sparks of pain grounded Hermione, reminding her that she was still alive, and she needed to keep her wits.

"You can stop."

The dog let her go. When she opened her eyes again, she saw Dolohov analysing her again, tucking away his wand in a reverent way.

"Very good. I think we're finally on the same page. After today, you're going to settle down. You're going to please your new master in whatever way he wishes. You'll gladly fulfil whatever depraved fantasy he imagines. So go ahead and misbehave. I dare you. You've irritated me enough that I'd enjoy seeing you screaming for my mercy."

She trembled again as he stood abruptly, heading for the door. With a swish of his hand, the dark patronus disappeared into the ether, and when he exited, she collapsed against the cold metal table, slowly sucking on the key inside her mouth for solace.

---

Standing in front of the imposing doors to the Wizengamot, waiting to be allowed entrance, Hermione kept herself rigid in Titus' grasp. He held onto the back of her neck, slowly brushing his thumb along a trail down the soft curve.

"You're too quiet," he whispered.

She hadn't said a word since Dolohov left, not even when he'd asked to know what they'd discussed, sensing it had disturbed her.

She wondered if Titus would let Dolohov cut off body parts to control her.

He would, she suspected. What was a hand compared to a life? What was a leg? Or a tongue? At what point would it stop?

"Don't do this," she finally begged. "I was happy. I'll never disobey again. Just let me go back to him."

Once upon a time, a simple plea would showcase his dimples and a soft grin, shaking his head in amusement as he gave her what she wished. Now he glanced down at her with hard eyes.

"Happiness is a fleeting thing to pursue. Safety and stability are far more important. I'm confident that in time you'll learn to find your joy again within those parameters, and I promise to do my part to help you find it."

"Draco's right," she spat. "I'll never love you again. How could I?"

His hand stilled, thumb near her pulse. She bet he could feel how hard her heart pounded.

He bent forward to whisper in her ear. "No matter how much you lash out, I won't be swayed. This trial might hurt your spirit even further, and I'm sorry for that. Even if you hate me, just know that everything I do is for you. One day, this will all be behind us, and I hope you understand my reasons and forgive me. As my own concession, I'll give you the same unbreakable vow I'd promised before the Trial, and I'll grant you six months to readjust into your new life before trying for a baby. Hermione— you must know that I want to treat you as more than my breeder. I want you to be my wife in everything but name."

"Your wife?" Hermione snarled. "Did your father ever place your mother in shackles? I can't be your wife *and* your slave."

His lips brushed near her ear, pulled close to his expansive chest.

"My mum never killed anyone, love, and I can't risk you sabotaging this trial."

The silencio hit her without warning, stealing her voice, just as the heavy doors groaned open.

---

Hermione shifted in the iron chair, chained down even further. No matter how much she moved, she couldn't get comfortable, sitting straight, poised on the its sharp edges. The chill of the courtroom raised the hair along her arms, the temperature just above freezing, intentionally intolerable.

Titus stood beside her, dressed in his full auror outfit *sans* mask, and in front of her was a sea of purple robes – the most important members in wizarding society.

The trial was closed to the public, and only Lucius sat in the stands. He clutched his cane, pin-straight blond hair like a waterfall down his shoulders, and an imperious expression decorating his face. Hermione didn't stare at him for too long, finding it disconcerting to see so much of Draco in him, focusing once again on the threat before her.

A full Wizengamot. Every single member. The rare sight intimidated her, showing the serious nature of the trial. All but a few of them exhibited their mutual disdain, and their solemn faces seared into her.

Walter Filibus sat in the center— the Chief Warlock. He'd been presiding over the trial for several minutes already, going over procedure. Hermione found it hard to concentrate on his statements, remembering the way he'd gently held out the blue candy to her as a child.

An ambivalent expression replaced his past benevolence as he narrowed his eyes on her, attempting to be neutral.

Hermione saw right past it. Saw right past all of them.

They hated her, as they always had. There had never been a moment they'd seen her as fully human, worthy of the rights of the average wizard.

Walter Filibus adjusted his bifocals and shuffled his parchments. "We are here today to determine the right of possession of the breeder, Hermione. Specifically, the severance of ownership from Draco Lucius Malfoy, and her transference to new ownership. She is—"

"Hem-hem," a high pitched, saccharine cough interrupted him. It belonged to a stout older woman sitting in the front row with grey hair and a pink collar sticking out from under her robes. She smiled sweetly.

Filibus looked as if he was attempting every strategy of patience. "While I normally wouldn't tolerate being interrupted, you may speak, Dolores."

"The girl has shown herself to be a menace to society, a dangerous role model for other breeders, having killed several men of *precious* magical blood. I vote that we put her to death."

Titus dug his hand into her shoulder, the only outward sign of his emotions.

"Your request is dismissed." Filibus gave a dramatic wave of his hand. "Her guilt is not the purpose of this trial. The authorities have already cleared the charges, and any mention of her violations will result in removal of the offending Wizengamot member. When a muggleborn misbehaves, no matter the offence, the blame should be focused on the owner, who displayed negligence. I will not have this courtroom become a mockery, just because the situation is unprecedented."

The woman displayed a sharper edge as she turned up her nose at Hermione.

Feeling secure in his order of his courtroom, Filibus continued, going through the rest of the introductions and the procedures of the courts, until the true trial began.

"Titus Nott, as the main accuser in this case, you may now present the official evidence you have gathered as a Mediator, demonstrating why Draco Malfoy should lose his right to a breeder, potentially ending the Malfoy bloodline. This is no light accusation and must hold substantial weight to move forward."

"Honourable Warlock and esteemed Wizengamot, my first line of evidence is right here." Titus stepped forward, reached into his cloak, and extracted her wand. She almost gasped at the sight of the delicate vines crawling up the side, wishing she could hold it close to her heart.

Titus laid the evidence before Filibus. "This is Hermione's wand."

The judges gasped in unison. Dolores clutched at the front of her robes.

"Who gave this to her?" Filibus asked.

"Draco Malfoy."

Another round of gasps.

*Liar!* she tried to shout, but nothing exited past the silencio. Hermione clutched the edge of her hard chair to control herself.

The blows kept coming. Titus *revealed* to the courts that during an interrogation of Draco he discovered that he'd allowed her to wander Diagon Alley polyuiced and without supervision. That he gave her access to restricted knowledge, including dark magic and advanced potion making. And the worst— that Draco gave her contraceptives to prevent pregnancy.

She should have known Titus would use the information he'd gathered over the past year against her. That he'd never been content or forgiving. Even still, it hurt to hear the mixture of lies and truth.

"Is there anyone that can corroborate your accusation? A witness, perhaps?" Filibus asked after a long discussion.

"Yes. There is a witness."

For the first time during the trial, Titus glanced back at Hermione with an odd expression, and it took a moment to interpret. She saw an apology— guilt— and it set her on edge. She braced herself for an invisible threat.

But *nothing* could have prepared her for Katie walking through the double doors, Marcus beside her. Her head was bowed, expression hidden by dark hair. She seemed skinnier than usual and paler too.

Katie refused to meet Hermione's horrified stare as Flint led her friend to a chair to her right, much more comfortable than her own. She lowered herself slowly, wringing her hands in a nervous movement that Hermione had never seen before. Katie had always been one of the bravest of the group, self-assured, jumping headlong into any adrenaline-based activity. To see her so terrified caused the hair along her neck to stand in alarm.

"What evidence can this witness provide?" Filibus asked.

Once again, Titus reached into his cloak and to her surprise, took out another wand.

Katie's. She recognized it immediately. Had risked a great deal to obtain it.

After she'd retrieved the wands from Nott manor, she'd hidden them at Malfoy manor and had never given them back, besides Julie's. So how could Titus have possibly known about it?

Perhaps he'd found them in his search. But an instinct inside her hinted at another, more insidious conclusion.

"Not only did Draco Malfoy permit Hermione to have a wand, he also intended to give wands to other muggleborns." Titus held up the wand for the court to view properly. "After a more thorough investigation, I discovered the Flint breeder already had one in her possession."

Chaos ensued. Judges stood from the seats, shouting, fists raised.

It required several strikes of Filibus' gavel to bring order. Even then, it took a much longer time for everyone to quiet and return to their seats. When they did, Hermione could see their expressions had shifted into condemnation. What Titus presented was damning. A crime unthinkable to them.

"Is this true?" Filibus asked Katie.

"Yes— Draco allowed Hermione to get me a wand," she lied, looking like she might hyperventilate. "I didn't mean to do anything wrong." She pointed at Hermione. "She made me accept it. I didn't want to take it. Please, let me stay at Flint castle. I can't— I don't want to go to anyone else."

An invisible knife entered Hermione's chest. She glanced down, as if seeing the bloody wound in her heart. Her mouth opened, and even if she'd had her voice, she wouldn't have been able to make a sound.

Marcus pulled Katie closer to his side, rubbing at her back and whispering things in her ear, as she trembled and sobbed.

"Don't cry, my dear." Filibus produced a pitying expression. "You've done the right thing today. We fully believe you were pressured into accepting the wand, and that you would never do something like this again. Everyone knows that proper muggleborns are happy in their station and have no desire for true magic."

A part of Hermione wished to obliviate herself, even if it resulted in damage to her brain. The betrayal burned so deep, she didn't know if she could ever recover from the shock. Her oldest friend had just lied to the Wizengamot, blaming everything on her, even knowing the potential consequences.

Had she been coerced?

Of course she had been.

All Hermione knew was that she would have never betrayed Katie in the same way, even under duress. Hermione would have *died* for her, just like she would for Julie or Dean or Finch. Her coven had been her heart, her soul.

A dark hole opened, swallowing her whole. The fall was endless.

Hermione kept shaking her head in disbelief, eyes burning, unable to concentrate on what Titus was saying to Filibus, knowing the man she'd once trusted with everything had orchestrated this slicing pain.

*How could you?* she screamed soundlessly.

But Katie refused to look at her, wringing her hands, tears streaming down her face.

Deep down, she understood her motives stemmed from fear, and a part of Hermione already forgave her, but it didn't stop the pulse of heartache across her chest, silencing any logical defence of her friend.

Hermione watched in a haze as Filibus called Lucius down as a representative for Draco. When he got to the front, he clicked his cane, standing with confidence.

"I take full responsibility for my son's actions," he emphasised each word with a slow drawl. "There is no need for a vote on the matter. As the head of household, I voluntarily sever the ownership."

The court burst into another flurry of conversation, whispers and exclamations, silenced with a bang of the gavel. Walter Filibus was beginning to look annoyed at the continual interruptions.

"With this decision, I also beg for clemency," Lucius continued. "I now believe Draco was far too young to oversee a breeder. Seeing his mother's death at such a young age affected him more deeply than I first suspected. As a consequence, he bonded to the girl unnaturally, confusing the normal roles. I petition for the courts to allow him a second chance. Time to mature and contribute in other ways, and allow him to eventually obtain another— more docile— breeder."

This time the Chief Warlock allowed discussion; the rise and fall of voices reverberated around the room as the Wizengamot talked amongst themselves. Filibus stayed quiet, sitting back in thought.

Draco had warned her that his father needed to play along, so she refused to feel hurt by his words. But still. The thought of Draco competing for someone else almost broke through her control.

To give her mind something to focus on, she imagined their future in exile. Lazy days tangled together. Perhaps near the sea where they could swim on the shore. Or maybe there'd be a forest nearby that she could explore, searching for creatures and secrets.

"I agree with Lucius," Titus' voice broke past the cacophony, once again standing beside her. "How many of us were foolish in our youth, unready for adult responsibilities? Add to that a high-spirited muggleborn, and it was doomed to fail. However, I also believe in forgiveness. It would be an unthinkable travesty if the Malfoy line died out, especially with how our pureblood lines have already dwindled over the ages."

"Well said." Filibus held his gavel, poised as if to strike again at the smallest sound. "If we were all judged by the indiscretions of our youth, not many of us would be able to sit in these stands as a moral authority." A short round of congenial laughter broke through. "The Malfoy line should not be extinguished so easily. With that said, the charges are serious. There needs to be a probationary period for Draco, possibly three years. Maybe a mentorship with someone in the ministry. Someone who could guide him to the right path. In that time, if he shows contrition and makes a vow never to repeat the same mistakes, we'll allow him to enter the Trials again to obtain another breeder, preferably one with a gentler temperament. I don't believe this needs to be taken to a vote either. We are all witnesses to the terms, and it doesn't need to be publicised. Does that sound fair to all parties involved?"

Lucius gave a deep nod, blond hair like a curtain. "I'll take it upon myself to make sure he learns to behave in the way a pureblood heir should. I assure you that he can be a great asset

to the wizarding world if he is given mercy."

Titus touched her shoulder as if noticing she was unravelling, but she didn't truly feel it. Didn't feel anything. It was as if she'd been disconnected from reality, floating in some other world, viewing the events separate from herself. Her pain had diminished into nothing.

What did it matter— any of this— if she was to be in exile? Let them make their edicts. Let Katie keep her safety. Let Titus believe he won.

Walter Filibus rolled up his parchments and set them aside. "The last matter of business is the transfer of ownership. Titus, as you've told me, you're prepared to put in a second token for your previous ward?"

"I plan to, yes." The hold on her shoulder turned to a caress of fingers on her neck in a subtle way the audience couldn't see. "When she was in my household, Hermione behaved properly and thought of her duty as sacred. I'm confident that she'll once again settle in my care, and I'm looking forward to finally honouring my family by producing a child to carry on the Nott name."

*Behaved.* She wished to tell the courts that she'd learned dark, wandless magic under his nose, obtained the wands, created a coven. He'd never been in control of her spirit.

"I believe you're right." Walter Filibus readjusted his bifocals. "The best fit for Hermione would be with you. However, procedure must still be held sacred. As per tradition, if another person wants to compete for the right to obtain her, then they can enter their token by the end of this trial." He glanced around. "Would anyone present want to compete against Titus Nott for his claim over the breeder, Hermione?"

Absolute silence. A single movement would have been heard, but no one stirred, staring resolutely ahead.

Hermione realised the courtroom had been closed off to the public intentionally. Titus didn't want to bother with any rogue competitors, and of those wizards in attendance, no one would dare pit themselves against the Butcher.

They waited the allotted time.

"Since no one came forward, we will put the matter to a vote," Walter Filibus said. "Those in favour of the transfer of ownership to Titus Nott raise your hand."

Every single hand in the sea of purple robes raised.

The crack of the gavel signalled the end.

And that was all it took, a single vote to return her to her old cage.

"Congratulations, Titus." Walter Filibus gave a true smile. "Your parents would be pleased with your decision to finally carry on the family name. As the new owner of Hermione and a Mediator on the case, I'll allow you to decide what to do with the wands."



"Thank you, honourable Warlock," Titus said. "While the destruction of wands is generally unacceptable, I believe a demonstration is imperative to this situation."

Titus walked forward to the podium. He didn't look at Hermione, facing the judges, grabbing and holding up Katie's wand up for everyone to see. She didn't even have the time to process what he was about to do when he snapped it in two. A shower of magical sparks followed.

Katie gasped at the sight of her broken wand, hand to her mouth, and cried harder. Flint pulled her as close into his side as he could.

When Titus grabbed Hermione's wand, she attempted to stand in panic, the chains rattling, preventing her from moving. He hesitated— for just a moment— turning so that his eyes met her desperate stare. He allowed brief softness to peek through, giving her a twisted hope that he'd change his mind.

She'd been fourteen when she'd first held it. Made of vine wood. Ten and three-fourths inches long, possessing a dragon heartstring core. Crafted by Ollivander. If she closed her eyes, she felt its weight in her hand, remembered the wondrous sparks it emitted in celebration when she'd first held it, proof she belonged in the wizarding world.

Titus clasped her wand between his strong hands— hands she used to hold for security.

*Don't*, her lips moved without sound, shaking her head in horror.

*Forgive me*, he mouthed back.

For the second time in her life, she saw a shower of sparks erupt from her wand as Titus snapped it in half.

Hermione's heart snapped along with it.

---

She didn't remember the immediate aftermath. Maybe she screamed or fought against her constraints. Maybe she stayed frozen, stuck in a trance, unable to understand how someone who claimed to love her could hurt her so much.

She did remember watching the Wizengamot filter out. Katie had called her name a few times, which she ignored, and then finally Marcus led her away, supporting her as she sobbed against him.

Titus gently undid the silencio and her chains that kept her bolted to the chair. She didn't resist as he tugged her up into a fierce hug.

"Forgive me, Sprite," his voice was rough in her ear. "Like I warned you, they needed to be convinced. There was no other choice. Forgive me."

Hermione resembled a doll in his hold, going limp, unable to force her limbs to move.

She blinked, certain she'd wake up from the numb haze, if only she distanced herself enough from the pain. In the cocoon of her mind, nothing could hurt her, burrowing deep within

herself. Seeing her wand snapped in half didn't exist in those dark, calm spaces.

When Titus began to lead her out of the courtroom, whispering assurances of his love, she looked in wonder at her legs, amazed they even held her upright.

The key still rested under her tongue. Its bitter metal taste was the only thing keeping her tethered to reality.

"You knew about the wands," she found her voice as it echoed in the corridors. A few Wizengamot judges passed them by, patting Titus on the shoulder as they went. "You knew I had taken them from the manor."

It was the only conclusion that felt right.

"I discovered your hiding place by accident shortly after the Trials," he admitted. "Sometime in the future, I'm going to need to know how you obtained them, along with the other items." Titus kept one arm draped around her waist, holding her up and propelling her forward.

Her mind struggled to work efficiently, conjuring the little hole under the floorboards where she'd hidden the wands and books.

For an entire year he'd known of them, which meant—

"You let me take back the wands, so that you could frame Draco."

He didn't answer her charge, but she knew the answer.

"I found them in my search of the manor. They were cleverly hidden, but it made it easier that I knew what to search for in the first place."

She flinched, wondering about the fate of Dean and Finch's wands, but didn't have the courage to ask yet. Destroying wands was considered a great sin, since there were very few wandmakers, and they could be reused.

Why didn't he bring Dean or Finch to the trial?

"I left the book," she whispered. The skin bound one. The darkest magic she'd ever encountered. They both understood which one she'd referenced. "What would you have done if I'd taken it?"

"I would've had Malfoy imprisoned in Azkaban," he admitted. "The courts would've seen the possession of it on par with a terroristic threat, given his other charges. Even his father might not have saved him."

She'd visited Nott Manor to plot Julie's escape, but he'd been laying a trap for her as well, planting evidence.

Hermione's instincts to leave the book had paid off. She wondered what about the book was so dangerous it would have kept Draco in chains. Titus knew the importance, and as a Mediator, he'd be allowed to study it.

"Where are we going?" Her body still felt like it trudged through tar.

She feared the extra implications of owner transference. Despite his promises, did the court expect him to stake his claim over her right away?

"Home."

"I'm not—" she started. "I can't—"

"Do you really think so low of me?" He caught on to what she hinted at. "You're in no state to do anything but rest and recover. I promised you six months, didn't I? And even then, I'd never force you. I'd give you even longer if I could."

"But the ritual—"

"Was to break the curse," he whispered. "It's not relevant to our situation."

She knew that, but it calmed her to hear.

Six months— as if he truly believed that was enough time to transfer her affection and seduce her to his bed. Did he think she'd so easily forget the sparks of her snapped wand?

She'd never forgive him for that.

Hermione dug her fingernails into the skin of her palms, hard enough to give her something to focus on. It didn't matter how much time he'd prepared to give her. It didn't matter what plans he made at all.

Because she wasn't going to be there. In just a few short minutes, she'd be in France, waiting for Draco to find a way to her. She rolled the key in her mouth to keep the numbness from encroaching.

There was so much she wished to scream about, but she calmed herself, examining her environment. The corridors narrowed as they ascended into the upper levels. The lift rattled as they entered and exited.

"I expected an angrier reaction," Titus whispered, narrowing his eyes on her. "What's going on in your mind right now?"

He should feel suspicious. The act of calmly walking along beside him without a fight signalled resistance.

"Absolutely nothing." She didn't want to give him anything more of herself. Not even her anger. Vengeance would get in the way of escape.

"That's a lie. I know you're hurt right now, and I'll spend the rest of my life—"

"Stop."

He obeyed her sharp request, breathing out a forceful breath in frustration, continuing onward. The path felt as if it stretched forever, a purgatory, filled with all the things she regretted.

He acted as if he hadn't destroyed her whole life and then plucked her damaged body from the ruins. She'd rather he had left her in the ashes to burn with everything else.

Hermione wanted to hurt him deeply, wished to unshackle herself just to curse him, but she suppressed the instinct. She'd promised Draco not to let anything in the trial get to her. So she welcomed the numbness in her soul—the cold wall of protection she'd built when her father died.

Entering the atrium, the grotesque statue made of dark stone dominated the grand room, *Magic is Might* inscribed at the bottom. A wizard and witch sat on ornate thrones, crushing naked muggles beneath them. She'd seen it many times in her life, walked past it without a second glance. But today, it was as if she viewed it with fresh eyes, seeing it for what it was.

Beside it was an old fountain where the previous statue used to exist—the supposed residence of a galleon portkey.

Focused on the bubbling fountain, Hermione almost missed the auror approaching them. He looked to be older than Titus, yet remained lower in rank.

"Sir," he attempted to hand Titus a rolled scroll. "I need you to sign off on something before you leave."

"I'm off the clock," Titus snapped in a dangerous voice. "Can it wait?"

"I'm very sorry sir. I'm afraid it can't. I have to turn the paperwork in today." The man's eyes widened and flicked to her.

Titus gave a heavy sigh. "Alright, hand it over."

This was the man that Lucius had sent as a distraction. It had to be.

Making sure Titus was looking the opposite direction, scribbling his signature on the scrolls, Hermione spat the key into her hand, giving herself a moment to think.

She'd need to be fast, a clear plan in mind, without second guessing decisions. Which meant she needed to rule out a plan. Realistically, she didn't have time for both.

Exile or the unknown. The fountain or the floo.

From her vantage point, she visually scoured the fountain for a black galleon. Her heart sank, unable to find it, though she might just be missing it—or it might not be there at all.

Unlike Draco, she didn't trust Lucius. His monologue in the courtroom felt too true, too real. Hermione took a moment to grieve the dead dream of exile. She buried the hypothetical future deep in her thoughts and focused on the only other option available.

She could see partially down the floo corridor, though Titus' bulk blocked most of her view.

He was still distracted, talking to the auror. A part of her never wanted to move, frozen with fear, but she had to try. Once Titus took her to the manor, she might never be able to get away.

She tapped on one shackle and then the other. Click. Click. The sound echoed louder than she expected, but she caught the shackles before they could clatter to the floor. Again, she waited, but he was still focused on the parchments.

Her magic rushed back into her hands, as if it had been waiting to be freed, ignited by her rage. She couldn't beat Titus in a duel, especially wandless, and dark or complex curses might expend too much energy. Her only option was surprise.

Now or never.

"Aguamenti!" Having the source of water right next to her, it didn't take much magic or precision to force it forward in a sudden wave, slamming into both the men in front of her.

She didn't wait to see how they fared, sprinting forward, throwing up a shield around her just in case. It felt like she waded through a nightmare, ankle deep in sand.

No one followed her or tried to stop her, but she had no time to critically think about why that would be.

She hurtled around the corner into the corridor housing the main floos to the ministry.

And then abruptly stopped.

Lucius stood like a statue by the cordoned-off floo, the jar of powder in one gloved hand.

Hermione clutched at her chest, surprised to feel her heart still beating.

"You weren't supposed to know about this one," she said dumbly.

Lucius scoffed. "I was the one who taught Draco everything he knows. Of course, he had a second plan I didn't know about. He even had a third plan that *you* didn't even know about, just in case your mind was compromised. I discovered them all."

Even though she never trusted Lucius, the sight of him standing there— the implications— shattered everything inside her.

"Why?" She poured all her condemnation into a single word. Draco had told his father his plans and had counted on him, even reluctantly. And in return, Lucius betrayed him

She grieved for Draco, waiting in a ministry cell, desperate to trust his father's love.

"You were a liability," he explained. "He became reckless. As much as I wish to give my son everything, I have limits to what I'll allow. At the rate he was going, he would have killed himself."

Her brain finally caught up to the situation, connecting all of the dots.

"You were the one that messed with my portkey."

"I keep a tight lock on every portkey I own, rare as they are, and I always know when Draco's in possession of one. He's very skilled in apparition, especially to the manor, so I knew that this time the portkey was for you. I'd hoped it would strand you somewhere you couldn't return."

"You put me in danger."

"I did no such thing," he sneered. "A muggleborn is too valuable to really be harmed. It only protected Draco. It would have gotten rid of my lingering problem without greater interference from me."

Titus entered the corridor calmly, stepping up behind her. A heavy hand landed on her shoulder. "Are you sure he didn't plan anything else?"

"The window of opportunity for escape had already been narrow, so most likely not, but you shouldn't discount Draco."

"I'll give him that. He can be clever when he wants to be. Hopefully, he starts to direct it to something more useful."

She hated the way they talked around her, as if she couldn't hear it.

Hermione found it a struggle to take in a full breath.

"I can't guarantee he won't attempt other plans to get her back," Lucius warned.

"I'm already preparing for that. As we discussed long ago, I'll excuse some of his schemes, as long as it's not too destructive or he doesn't touch her."

The words "long ago" stuck out to her. Her thoughts raced in circles.

"How long have you planned—" Hermione closed her eyes, understanding every horrid thing. "You *sold* me to him, didn't you? From the beginning. In those first days when Titus came to you to make a deal after Draco sent him away. You never planned to let me stay with him at all, even if I had behaved perfectly."

"I didn't sell you for money," Lucius drawled as if that made it better. "Our agreement was to wait for an heir. If you'd done your duty, I might have let you stay another year or so before going back to Nott. Even in that simple task, you've been a waste of time. The healers confirmed the lack of pregnancy, even this close to the year mark. Knowing that, I've decided it's better to cut my losses now. A quick, necessary severance. Draco's young, and I'm confident he'll soon get over the sting of his first woman to find a new one."

"He won't want anyone else!" Hermione shouted, stepping forward. She raised her wrists, wishing to rip out his throat. But Titus tugged her back into place, reminding her that she couldn't win a fight like this.

The lie ran deep. Lucius had accepted the deal Titus had given him after the ritual—the same one Draco had denied. His cryptic warnings at the dinner echoed to the present.

Lucius readjusted his stance. "I've lived long enough to know that another woman can fill the void of the first. Once he has a child of his own, he'll understand why I've done this. Sometimes taking something toxic away is the best course of action. And that reminds me—" he glared at Titus. "I require your pledge that when Draco finally chooses to enter the Trials for another muggleborn—"

"He'll win, of course," Titus cut him off. "I'll personally make sure of it, even if he barely participates. When I said it was imperative that the Malfoy line continues, I meant it. He just won't do so with Hermione. Saying that, I'll need the reversal to your family's binding spell."

"I'll send you a parchment with the instructions. It can be complicated to remove, but not impossible, especially with your level of skill." Lucius scraped his cane along the tile floor while readjusting. "Before I leave, I want further assurance you'll follow through with the rest of our deal."

"It's already put into motion. Why else do you think Filibus kept the verdict from the public and mentioned a mentorship for the ministry? He plans to take your son under his wing with an internship—if he turns his attitude around. It's an enviable spot that even top graduates are routinely denied. I've already sent in my recommendation for him next year. Of course, he'll need to serve as a Wizengamot member for several years first, but who knows, maybe in fifteen years or so, he could attempt to ascend to the Chief Warlock—or possibly even the Minister for Magic."

"Excellent. I think this deal will serve both of our families very well in the long run." Lucius gave a long nod, showing his intended dismissal. He took out the jar of floo powder and threw it inside the fireplace under "maintenance," facing the dying embers.

"Draco will never forgive you for this," she spat before he could leave. "He'll hate you for the rest of his life. Until your death, you'll regret today. You'll think back on every monstrous thing you've *ever* done, and this will burn you the most, because after this, he'll turn his back on you."

Lucius didn't turn around at the scathing rebuke, but his shoulders tightened, as if she'd petrified him. "Who would tell him? The only people who know of my involvement are in this room."

She'd fucking tell him; no matter how difficult, she'd find a way.

"You underestimate your son. He's not an idiot."

"Even if he does suspect my involvement, duty comes before love. I've never asked my son to sacrifice before today, but the future of our family depends on his renunciation of you." He only looked at Titus one more time. "Keep her homebound for as long as possible. Until she's pregnant, if you can. Time and space will help them both with this transition."

With an air of apathy, he disappeared within the embers, leaving her alone with the Butcher.

"I allowed you to attempt an escape," Titus whispered, pulling her close to him, lips near the curve of her shoulder. "I allowed the auror to approach me, curious at what you'd do. I played along, because I know you do better when you've exhausted all your options."

Hermione closed her eyes, wishing for Harry's invisibility cloak, something to hide under.

She hadn't exhausted *everything*. He wanted to entomb her again, and to do that, she wouldn't go without a fight, even if it was a fool's errand.

The magic tingled in her fingers, her intention focused like a sword, sharper than the knife he possessed. She shoved off the hand on her shoulder and walked forward with deliberate steps and twisted with her wrists raised, getting into an official duelling stance.

"Hermione," Titus warned, holding out his wand in a deceptively easy manner.

She wanted him to hurt. To bleed. To scream for her mercy. It gathered in her heart, a seething dark mass of enmity.

"Cruico!"

Nothing happened.

Titus had been prepared to defend himself, but he pulled his head back, as if shocked she'd even dare to cast an unforgivable on him.

"No," she sobbed, shaking her wrists and trying again. "Crucio!"

Again, nothing.

She panted, glaring at her hands, willing the curse to life.

Why wasn't it working? It did with Blaise, and she'd somehow managed an Imperio with Harry. And she felt just as furious now with just as much intention.

Over and over again, she cast it. With each attempt, Titus straightened further, lowering his wand. His lips kept jumping from an almost grin to an almost frown.

"Oh, Sprite," he finally took pity on her. "Using a crucio on someone you love is much harder than on a stranger."

"I don't love you anymore!"

"Perhaps," he conceded. "But the capability to torture me must be cultivated. It's the grief that's holding you back, which isn't really hate. In the future, if you want to crucio me, you have to *really* mean it. Imperio is always slightly easier to cast, depending on the motive. Let me show you how it's done." He flicked his wand forward. "Imperio!"

Her shock only lasted a moment, unable to stop the curse striking her. It infected her instantly, vanishing her free will. Like a puppet, she rose from her duelling stance, both hands limp at her side.



"Come to me," he urged in a gentle voice. She did as he asked, without thought or care, though there was a buried voice inside her that raged at the command. When she walked into arms reach, he accioed the shackles she'd discarded in the atrium, along with the key. "Hold out your hands." She did so, and the obsidian snapped on one and then the other.

After he imprisoned her magic, Titus released the unforgivable.

But she still didn't move. Didn't speak. She continued to stare at him in a stupor, unable to comprehend that their plans didn't work— that she wouldn't escape. All of her hope burned up inside her, leaving only the lingering flame of Draco's promise to always come for her, following the string of fate.

"Such a useful object." He held up the key in the light and then tucked it into his pocket. "From the Blacks, I bet. I don't think I'll give it back." He examined Hermione after, as if looking for a wound, eyes landing on her neck. "Ah, I almost forgot." From his pocket, he took out a crystal that gleamed, casting fragmented light in pretty patterns on the ground, dangling from a black ribbon. "Your greatest mistake, Sprite, was believing that you belonged with anyone else but me."

Titus' hands wrapped around the back of Hermione's neck, gently brushing away her curls in reverence, and once again secured his universe tight around her throat.

---

If you want more to read from me while waiting, I completed a short fic for the Teratophilia fest 2.0 called [Blood Moon](#).

If you want somewhere to decompress and talk about this chapter, there's a Dramione WIP discord with a House Pet channel: <https://discord.gg/Kmze73s7HT> There are tons of other Dramione WIPs to follow too!

Also, Frau Blucher blessed me with another amazing fanart of Hermione, displayed at the bottom of Chapter 43, The Rotten Truth. Go check it out!

Art by [Frau Blucher](#)



## Chapter End Notes

Chant with me now: trust the process, trust the process, trust the process.

# Chapter 46: The Butcher of Manchester

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Shawn James— “The Thief and the Moon” AND A Perfect Circle —”Counting Bodies Like Sheep to the Rhythm of the War Drum” (The perfect song for the Butcher!)

Thank you to my wonderful beta, MyPrivateInsanity, and wonderful alpha team for their work on this chapter!

Frau Blucher knocked it out of the park again, and made a sweet art piece for Hermione and Theo. Go check it out on chapter 5!

Also, thank you everyone for your comments/ kudos/ follows! I can't always respond to every comment, but I treasure each one and always reread them!

Trigger Warnings at the end:

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

## The Butcher of Manchester

Hermione stretched, snuggling into her mattress.

And then she lurched upright, dragging the sheets to her chest, glancing around in panicked confusion. A bird trilled softly outside her window, and the first rays of morning sunshine filtered through the leaded panes, illuminating the pastel colours of her childhood bedroom.

Nothing had changed during her time at Malfoy manor. Sumptuous fabrics framed the windows, and flowered wallpaper decorated the walls. The vanity still rested in the corner, with her favoured comb on top. The closet was cracked slightly open to expose rows of old dresses— along with a few new ones— hanging next to the red cloak.

Feeling disoriented, Hermione sorted through the previous day's events.

When Titus had brought her back to the manor through the floo, she'd still been in a trance, gutted by the unexpected loss, unable to shake away her shock to fight the journey.

"Welcome home," he whispered, entering the sitting room. She looked vacantly at the familiar decor as he led her to a nearby couch, and then she collapsed onto it, legs unstable from the whiplash of the day.

"Do you need anything? Tea, perhaps?" Titus studied her carefully, as if she was a volcano about to explode.

She didn't answer, eyes fixed forward.

A muscle in his jaw clenched, and he shifted on his feet. "I don't wish to leave you so soon, but I really do have to finish the paperwork for transfer tonight."

Again, she didn't respond.

"I see you need some space to process what's happened," he continued. "I'll be back later. Don't wait up."

He hesitated a moment, as if bracing for something. Maybe her anger. Or a fight. But she stayed silent and didn't turn to look as he returned to the floo, disappearing before she could find her voice.

Frozen in her stupor, Hermione had wandered around her old cage for hours as if attempting to find a way out, already returning to her ghostly form. She checked the floorboard in her closet first, needing to confirm the missing wands and books, and then fell into her old bed, eyes burning with unshed tears, blinking at the coffered ceiling. Bitty had begged her to drink her favourite Earl Grey to calm her nerves, and she'd relented in desperation for comfort.

Titus must have ordered Bitty to spike it with dreamless sleep, because after that, she remembered nothing else.

Fully awake now, Hermione scrunched the coverlet tight in her fists. Untethered from her shock, her rage returned, coalescing into increasingly stronger waves, crashing against her chest with each breath.

She needed to move. Go somewhere. Do *something*.

Unable to sit still, Hermione threw off the covers, flung her legs off the bed, quickly dressed for the day, and began her search through all of Titus' usual haunts, braving a peek into his room and the study, finding them both empty.

"Bitty!"

The elf appeared, tugging on her ears, sensing her displeasure.

"Yes, Mistress?"

"Where's Titus?"

"The master is busy. He said to tell Mistress Hermione to make herself comfortable."

"I'm sure that backstabbing human toad does wish I'd just make myself *comfortable*."

The elf tugged on her floppy ears again in discomfort. "Bitty can get you anything you want. Eddy is making breakfast."

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. "No, I'm—" she took in a sharp breath, reminding herself that the elves didn't deserve her anger. Only one person in this household warranted

her ire. "Thank you, Bitty. Tell Eddy that I'd love to have breakfast."

There was no use in draining her strength by not eating.

Relieved to be given a task, Bitty disappeared.

Hermione began to pace in the corridor, feeling like a tiger she'd seen in a muggle movie, trapped behind bars, tail flicking in irritation as it prowled its enclosure.

Despite never wanting to see him again, Hermione also wished to spit on him. Curse him. Claw at him. Strangle him. And that would be hard to do without him present.

She knew Titus wasn't "busy." He was avoiding her, attempting to outwait her anger like he'd done in their past conflicts, as if the embers of hatred would magically cool with time.

As the day went on, Hermione suppressed her emotions, trapped in mind-numbing solitude, eating breakfast and then lunch. The discomfort didn't let her rest anywhere, heart sick with worry for Draco, already going mad with anxiety.

Perhaps she would've tempered herself a year ago, but now she was a flame left unattended, growing into a wildfire, scorching the earth.

She ended her wandering in the library. A new stack of books rested in an organised pile next to her old reading chair, as if an offering from Titus for absolution. She spied several interesting titles, but she didn't want them. The only ones she desired would be warded against her. The gifted books represented a distraction, and she loathed them for that. If she could, she'd destroy the whole manor, library included.

In fact— that sounded like a grand idea.

On a mission, Hermione marched her way to the kitchen. When she slammed open the doors, Eddy jumped in surprise and tried to protest her entrance, but he quickly yelped and scurried away to hide after seeing her ferocious expression. She rummaged through the drawers, shoving items out of the way, until she found what she wanted— a long butcher knife. The blade glinted in the sunlight, and she liked the weight of it in her hands.

Hermione returned to the library with determination. She picked up a gifted book, only hesitating a moment. Destroying literature would normally turn her stomach, an unforgivable sin, but Titus needed to physically see what she felt inside. The tip of the knife dug into the spine; she both hated and enjoyed the sight as she carved it into pieces. A fire lit inside her, and she slashed and demolished everything in her path. The chairs splintered when smacked against the walls, the pages shredded, the ancient fabrics ripped in half, the relics splintered into fragments.

After finishing her rampage, she viewed the carnage, trying to capture a fragment of peace.

But the ruination didn't satisfy her, and she lifted her weapon back up.

---

Hermione continued her frenzied destruction throughout the day, going room to room— everywhere she was allowed— leaving nothing unscathed. She spilled ink along his treasured desk, stabbed portraits, aiming for the screaming ancestors as they leaped from frame to frame to escape her. She tipped the suit of armour over, metal crashing to the checkmark tile, only letting herself feel a second of guilt before aiming her knife for the weft threads of the ancient troll tapestry.

When she finally entered Titus' mother's sitting room, her rage had reached a boiling point. She shattered the delicate vases, tore the curtains, littering the room with shards of glass and cushion stuffing. Splintered wood soon added to the rubbish on the floor, centuries of accumulated wealth cast into piles of meaningless mangled luxury.

By nighttime, the only untouched item in the manor was the painting of the ballerina, forever twirling in practised pirouettes.

Hermione gently carved out the woman, allowing the oil cloth to flutter to the floor, eyes still burning. "You're free now."

A scream followed, ripped from the raw wound in her soul.

But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Who was there to hear her?

Exhausted, Hermione finally slumped on the half-destroyed red settee. She grasped the knife to her chest, intending to use it on Titus when he returned.

But she fell asleep instead. Waking suddenly in the middle of the night, she discovered her knife missing, a blanket covering her, a pillow under her head, along with a short note from Titus written on crisp parchment.

**I knew you'd be angry, but your outburst exceeded my expectations.**

**Until you can control yourself, you're banned from any sharp objects. I also expect you to apologise to Eddy after giving him such a fright.**

**Please stop forcing me to add to your restrictions. I want to give you things. Not take them away. Tomorrow, I wish to have dinner with you, and we can discuss ideas to help fill your days with—**

Hermione threw the note to the side with a frustrated huff.

Midnight darkened the room, the unicorn statue barely visible, but even with only the moonlight filtering through the giant window she could see that everything had been returned to its original state, and she suspected the other rooms would be repaired as well. The glass vases were reformed. The curtains re-hung. The wood had been returned to its unfractured form.

And the ballerina was once again trapped in the painting.

---

Titus forced her to dinner for two days in a row, but she ignored any attempts at conversation, focused only on eating. After the second agonising dinner, he gave up begging her to acknowledge him and left her alone with the warning that he wouldn't allow her to wallow in silence forever.

Since the dinners, a full week had passed her by in a horrible blur, and she spent most of her time outside. Titus communicated with her exclusively through notes, and as the days continued, he sounded more and more desperate for her to reply.

At the moment, Hermione examined the bugs crawling around the insides of the terrariums, knees pulled to her chest by the faux fireplace in the treehouse. Though the terrariums were charmed to keep them alive, only a few survived her year away, due to natural life expectancy. Earlier that morning, she'd surprised Bitty by asking for a net and jar, followed by several hours of stomping around the south pond in search of different insects.

A rock struck against the window, pulling her out of her thoughts. And then two more followed.

"I know you're there," a familiar voice called out. "Your elves told me so. Let me up."

Hermione tensed. How dare Katie show her face! For days, her logical side had tried to rationalise everything that happened.

But the emotional side of Hermione burned at such high temperatures she was surprised there wasn't a real fire raging in her chest.

"Go away!" she shouted.

"Please, Hermione. Let me explain."

"Why are you even here? Who invited you?"

Hermione closed her eyes, clenching her teeth tightly enough she began to form a headache.

"I've wanted to see you for days, but Titus asked me— he's concerned. He told Marcus you barely come inside besides to eat or sleep."

Good. She hoped he was *concerned*. She wanted to hurt them all. Lash back until they were wounded just as severely.

But the cloud hovering over her head was hard to keep darkened. She feared one day she'd let it dissipate like Titus counted on, just so she didn't have to weather the storm by herself. But for now, she revelled in the sharp strikes of lightning.

If Katie wanted to see her so badly, she'd let her, but it would be on Hermione's terms.

She groaned while standing, finding her knees ached from her sitting position. The red bucket creaked on the way down. As she descended, she saw Katie standing under a grey sky, overgrown grass swallowing her ankles. The air was wet with unshed rain. Katie looked

pretty with her bangs curling from standing in the damp elements. She wore a blue coat, along with men's trousers, hair in a long braid, showing she'd flown recently.

But her face exposed her agonised guilt: puffy eyes from crying, face absent of warmth, mouth tilted down into a frown.

Hermione glared as she stomped forward. "You're uninvited from the manor."

"Hermione—" she sobbed, and the sound stabbed her soul.

"Don't you dare—"

"Titus—"

"They would have had to torture me for me to turn on you and lie, and even then, I would've spit in their faces. My only real crime was saving Julie— that's why I was really there— and you were hesitant to really help with that! And I *did* save her, with little help from you!"

"Don't talk to me that way. I had no choice."

"We all have a choice, and you've made yours."

Her mind and heart warred. The organ beating under her ribcage ached with pain, controlling her tongue.

When was survival more important than love? At what point would she have been okay with it? It was all too painful and fresh to detangle, and Hermione resented Titus for making her face it so soon when he'd caused it.

"I'm so sorry." Katie began to cry. "I just want to explain. Please, let's go inside and have some tea and talk. I'm worried about you. I'm worried about us."

"Worried?" A spark of magic erupted under the shackles. "Only friends get to worry about each other, and you're not that anymore."

Katie took a step back, hand to her mouth. Hermione resisted the desire to soothe her.

"Of course, I'm your friend. We're a coven!"

"There's nothing for us to talk about." She shut her eyes to find balance before opening them. "Look, I get why you did it. Titus must have threatened to take you from Marcus and given that you— so I get it. And I forgive you for it, if that's what you're seeking. Go be happy in your life. Truly, I want that for you. I'll always love you. But I can't be your friend anymore after what you did, because I'm not sure I could ever trust you again."

Hermione turned her back on Katie before she combusted and returned to her only haven of safety.

When she entered the treehouse, she curled her knees back to her chest, listening to Katie's pleas as the rain pelted the window. Unable to bear the sound, she covered her ears to resist



the temptation to soften her heart, until Katie finally gave up.

From the window, she watched as her oldest friend stumbled back to the manor. The sight of her leaving almost had Hermione chasing after her.

Hermione lay on the ground, eyes on the enchanted ceiling, palms pressed to her burning eyes, regretting being so harsh.

*Come back*, she wanted to say. *Don't leave me. I understand.*

She smacked her forehead repeatedly with frustration, wishing she had a guidebook to lead her through the complications of both loving and hating her friend. Of both understanding why she'd done it and knowing she'd never have done the same.

Much later, Bitty arrived with a note from Titus.

**Katie had few options for her future, given that she might not be able to carry a pregnancy to term. If you want to blame anyone, then blame me, but don't shut out someone who loves you. At some point, you're going to have to learn to forgive.**

Learn to fucking forgive. Of course, he'd want that. Wouldn't that be convenient?

For once, Hermione broke her vow of silence. "Get me parchment and ink, Bitty."

The elf arrived shortly after, juggling the items she asked for, and Hermione scribbled away.

**Did you ask Dean or Finch to testify?**

She needed to know.

Bitty took her question, and Hermione waited in an agitated state, until she returned holding the reply. She could tell by the blotchiness of the first letter that he'd hesitated, as if considering what to say.

**I went to Dean first, since he might possibly have the most to lose. I planned to threaten Finch after Katie.**

Hermione tore the answer into shreds, feeling worse than before.

**If you threatened Dean first, then why wasn't he there instead?**

Another long wait as Bitty left and returned with a simple sentence.

**He called my bluff and told me no— in more colourful terms.**

Titus said that as if he'd never planned to follow through on the threats that he'd given them.

**And what would you have done if they'd all said no?**

The answer took a long time to arrive: **I'm not sure.**

---

---

Hermione didn't want to get out of bed the next morning. What would be the point? She'd already exhausted all of her activities in the manor. Instead, she let her eyes stay closed and pretended Draco lay beside her, giving one of his wicked grins. Perhaps he'd just told her a joke. Or maybe he was telling her about all the clever adventures he'd planned for her.

"Good morning, Draco," she whispered, imagining his finger stroking her cheek tenderly. "I miss you."

*Of course you do, Granger. I'd miss me too.*

"Arrogant arse."

She stopped the daydream, finding it too painful to participate. The daily ritual of imagining waking in Draco's arms was quite possibly the most pitiful thing she'd ever done.

Loud voices distracted her from her pathetic state.

In curiosity, she got up and wandered over to the window. When she peeked through the leaded panes, she saw Theo standing across from Titus with his wand raised.

"Let me in to see her!" The voices were warbled from the distance, but after cracking the window open, she heard them better.

"I've told you that it's too soon, which is why I banned you from the floo. Need I remind you that you helped her escape Flint castle? It would be generous of me if I let you see her at all. You can come back in a few weeks when you've cooled down."

Theo glowered, holding his body in a duelling stance.

"Of course I helped her! It's much more than you've ever done, you selfish git." He swallowed hard, wand hand now shaking. "Have you forced her to your bed yet?"

"What the fuck, Theo? How could you even ask that? I haven't touched her, of course. You're overreacting to the situation. Both of you are always so dramatic. I love—"

Theo threw a yellow curse, but Titus flicked it away without even trying.

"Curse me back!" Theo screamed. "Fight me!"

"I won't, but if you keep going, I'll immobilise you until you can gain some sense."

Theo threw several curses in a row in frustration, each darker as they went, but it was useless against his older brother, who blocked them like child's play. "Bloody hell, you're only going to hurt yourself."

Theo seemed to realise the same, because he got out of his duelling stance and rubbed his wrist under his nose. "I know you planned this. The only thing you care about is keeping her to yourself. She was happy with Mal—"

"I think you need to go back to your flat and calm down."

"I wish I could curse you."

"If I thought it would repair our relationship, I'd let you." Titus' expression softened. "But it wouldn't change anything. Hermione is back home where she should have been all along, safe beside me." He hesitated, lowering his wand. "I just want us to be a family again, Theo. Like how we were—"

"Fuck you."

"Stop this—"

Theo apparated away before Titus could finish, leaving him standing there, staring at the space his brother had vanished. He glanced to the sky, attempting to blink back his emotion, and as if he felt her glare, he turned toward her window.

Hermione quickly ducked out of sight and retreated to her bed, deciding to go back to sleep.

---

Three days later, she accidentally ran into Titus near the dining room on her way to breakfast. He was adjusting his auror armour, buttoning and tightening things into place, showing a flash of skin along his abdomen with each movement.

"Where are you going?" she asked without thinking. It looked more formal than his work attire, black mask hanging from his belt, extra wands in separate holsters, along with his knife sheathed on his leg.

Titus paused mid-snap, looking up in surprise. It was the first she'd spoken to him since the ministry, and the first time she'd used her voice in days.

He finished his adjustments, eyeing her carefully. "It's execution day."

Her mind went cold. Once a month, the ministry publicly punished or executed any captured Order members, traitors, or dissenters in muggle London.

Titus had never hidden the fact he oversaw the process, and it had never bothered her before, but that had been when she used to believe all of the people were criminals, deserving of death.

Who was he going to kill today? What was the crime, exactly?

Titus pulled on his leather gloves. "I wish you'd let me hug you goodbye."

It was intolerable. Both her loneliness that had become its own insidious poison and his desire to capitalise on it, orchestrating her fall.

She crossed her arms, showing him all of her loathing, and he rolled his eyes in response.

"How long will you insist on being bitter? A month? Two? A full year? Tell me so that I can adjust my expectations."

"However long it takes for you to realise your mistake and fix it."

He gave a noncommittal hum under his breath, straightening his crisp collar, and then he walked into the sitting room, giving a muffled goodbye.

As Titus disappeared into the embers, a sudden idea sparked in her mind— remembering something from her past— clearing the fog she'd been trapped inside.

---

Hermione patted Astria's neck, hands tangling in the horse's coarse mane. The gentle clop of hooves was the only sound as they travelled around the brush toward the property boundary. Hermione swayed on the powerful back, carefully scanning the air until she detected the shimmer.

The ward hole.

She hadn't thought of it since her childhood.

Three trees over, the second shimmer caught her eye— the one she'd never told anyone about, not even Theo. It enticed her closer, but she ignored its siren call, keeping her mission forefront in her mind.

There were two ward holes.

She was certain Titus had secured the original one with a boundary spell since her initial escape as a child.

The other remained unknown.

Hermione suspected the universe necklace had been retrofitted with a tracker, and it was likely Titus had tampered with the bracelet again. She'd attempted to rip off both the necklace and her leather bracelet several times without success, showing he'd created a loophole to the charms broken by the Goblins.

It left her in a precarious position, ignorant of his plans and what actions he'd already taken. If she hoped to escape Nott manor for good, Hermione needed to know all the precautions that Titus had set up to prevent her from doing that first.

Today would be a test— one Titus probably anticipated. A push at the edges of her cage to study what gave and what didn't. Every instinct inside her wished to flee through the unprotected ward hole and find Draco or the Order. But if she obeyed the compulsion and got caught, he'd know there was a second route out of the manor, and then he'd find it and shut off the potential forever.

For once, Hermione smashed down her impulsive nature, knowing she needed to be smart, patient, and careful while crafting her next move. She only had six months to find a way out, and she doubted there'd be any wiggle room for mistakes.

Hermione clicked her tongue and sent Astria forward, walking through the original shimmering ward hole.

Once outside the property boundary, she leaned over her horse, coat smelling of hay and sunshine, and whispered into her ear.

"Fly, Astria, fly!"

---

Astria galloped across open fields, and Hermione came alive for the first time since her capture, tilting her face toward the sun. It was a false freedom, but she allowed a moment of joy to burst through her dark countenance.

Soon enough, Hermione slowed the horse to a trot, realising she'd seen the same creek and copse of trees multiple times. No matter how hard she tried to steer Astria forward, her horse kept leading her in circles.

Titus must have set up failsafe charms outside the property boundary as well, to keep her within a certain distance from the manor. Perhaps a confusion spell, or maybe a rerouting one.

It was good information to know, but it did add another complication to think through.

Near the creek, Hermione slid out of her saddle, tying the reins around a nearby branch. She watered the horse first, then allowed Astria to graze while Hermione took out bread and cheese she'd nicked from the kitchen. Sitting on the muddy edge of the creekbed, she stuck her feet in the cool water while waiting in comfortable silence, trying to make it look as if she was just taking a temporary break.

Fifteen minutes later, a crack of apparition rent the air, and Titus appeared across the creek like she'd predicted. He crossed his arms over his auror uniform, absent of any visible blood splatters.

Titus seemed amused. "Are you finished wandering? Or do you need to complete a few more circles before returning home?"

He'd known she'd exited the grounds a long time ago and had decided to let her roam before collecting her.

"Kill anyone yet?" she snapped back.

He didn't react. "Punishments have been dealt, but the executions have now been delayed. I needed to handle a *personal* issue."

"What a shame your scheduled murders won't get finished on time. How inconvenient." She took another bite of cheese.

"It doesn't matter. The cameras malfunctioned and delayed it anyway." Titus reached into his vest pocket, extracting a box, pulling out a cigarette. "These things are much harder to quit than I anticipated."

"How did you find me?" She suspected the answer, but she needed to prove it.

"You didn't think I'd let you just walk off the property? I've had it charmed for years."

The glance to her neck betrayed his secondary thoughts, and she touched the universe strangling her throat. "You also tracked me?"

He shrugged, briefly pressing the cigarette to his lips before pulling it away. "For your own safety."

"I want the ability to take them off at times. They bother me."

"That's a lie. You barely feel them. I added so many cushioning charms to your jewellery and shackles they must feel like clouds."

"That's not the point."

Titus broke the unlit cigarette in half, throwing it aside. "They aren't decoration, Sprite. The necklace keeps track of your location, and the bracelet monitors your heart rate, telling me when you're in mortal peril. I will not capitulate to your whims when it comes to your safety, and I refuse to take them off until I feel I can trust you, which at this rate, won't ever happen."

So both the necklace and the bracelet *could* be taken off, but only by Titus, possibly activated by his touch.

She'd gotten the information she needed. "I'm ready to return, I guess."

"Will you be eating the bread? I need something to chew on or I'll smoke."

Hermione flung the sack of food over the creek, hoping it would hit his head, but he caught it easily as she made her way over to Astria. The mare placed her velvet nose in the center of her palm and huffed with affection.

"I'll accompany you back," Titus said, walking over to take the reins as Hermione vaulted back into the saddle.

---

Hermione reverted to silence as she swayed on horseback, dissecting their conversation, extracting all of the things he'd confirmed.

Number one: the original ward hole was charmed to inform Titus of her exit.

Number two: the necklace and bracelet were also charmed— both tracking her location and heartbeat— and could only be taken off by Titus.

Number three: even if she managed to exit the second ward hole without detection, she might only be taken in circles regardless.

All three facts presented different complications to her ultimate escape. Her only advantage was the secret of the potentially uncharmed ward hole.

Halfway to the manor, Titus pulled Astria to a stop, eyes on the horizon. Smoke could be seen twisting to the sky over a small hill, filled with trees displaying autumn leaves.

"Is there a wildfire?" Hermione asked.

"I doubt it. It's too small, and we're rather close."

He tugged on the reins, leaving their path, pulling them toward the line of smoke. Astria clopped along, and a deep unease overcame Hermione.

"Perhaps we should leave it alone."

"If it's what I'm suspecting, then I have a duty to check it out. And if it *is* the start of a wildfire, I'll need to smother it before it spreads. I don't have time to return you and deal with it separately either. I only have an hour before I need to be back in London."

That was a good point. Muggle fires were rather easy to contain by wizards, but if they didn't intervene early, it might devastate the wildlife.

The countryside proved to be only an illusion. As a child, she believed they lived in the center of fae land, but in reality, the space around the manor had been populated by several villages and homes just out of sight, the majority of them now abandoned.

The horse's hooves struck on pavement following a road, and she could see the smoke originated from a makeshift campfire right outside a muggle home identical to the others beside it—the third in a row of six. A cooking pot hung above low flames that had recently been put out. Many of the abandoned homes they passed had roofs that sagged, doors opened, showing the disrepair.

"Let's go back to the manor," she begged, but Titus only tightened his hold on the reins.

"Muggles aren't allowed to live here anymore."

Her stomach soured. "Why does it matter?"

"Order will always matter."

"What will you do to them?"

"Remind them that muggles have to live in sanctioned locations. I don't have time for anything today except to put a temporary trace on them. If they fail to register themselves within a certain amount of time, then a low-ranking auror or a bounty hunter will be sent to collect them."

There was nothing she could do or say to sway him away when they stopped in front of the house near the campfire. She noticed clothes pinned to a line, drying in the sun— little signs of life that betrayed a current inhabitant.

"Stay here," he commanded. The horse adjusted its weight under her as Titus raised his wand, whispered an *alohomora*, and entered the front door.

She waited in silence, hoping the situation didn't last long.

Within seconds, she heard muffled voices. Loud shouts. A crack like thunder.

Astria spooked under her, almost bolting. It took all of her limited skill to control the horse, but when she did, Hermione didn't waste time, knowing something dreadful had just happened. Ignoring his order to stay, she leapt out of the saddle, rushing inside.

The first thing she saw was a dead woman sprawled along rotten brown carpet in front of the entry to a kitchen, a gun near her fingertips. He'd used a desiccation spell, leaving her a shrivelled skin-wrapped skeleton. All the fluid in her body had been extracted within seconds, creating a crimson puddle around her body. The air reeked with the terrible stench of death, and she swallowed an instinct to retch.

Titus had collapsed in an old chair, pulling up the side of his armour with a hiss to examine a pink splotch near his ribs, already forming a bruise, and then healed himself with a few taps of his wand. "Stupid fucking muggle."

"What happened?" Hermione asked in shock.

"She shot me."

Hermione managed to gain the courage to enter the dark, dingy home further. "I thought your armour repels muggle bullets."

"The charms along my side must have needed to be renewed, and now they're disabled completely. I'm fine Sprite, it just hurt like fuck."

Did he think she cared for his well being? Her eyes stuck to the dead muggle, trying not to look too closely. Even deformed, she seemed much too young. "You still could have just disarmed her."

Titus pulled his shirt and armour back down, glaring at her. "It's illegal to own guns. She would've been executed for that alone, even if she hadn't attacked me. This just saved time."

*Saved time.* A latent surge of adrenaline spiked through her and quickly dissipated, leaving her empty. She went to a nearby chair and sat, eyes still on the muggle.

He'd killed her so easily, without thought or regret.

"Stay there while I check the rest of the house for others," he ordered.

Hermione tensed in her chair as Titus stood with his wand out, stalking through the others dark corridors and back rooms. He exited after only a minute, shaking his head.

"She was alone from what I can tell."

A horrible thought struck her.

"What if there *had* been other people?"



Once again, Titus collapsed in the rickety chair, creaking under his weight. He ran a hand along his face as if tired.

"If it had been another adult, I'd have considered mercy as long as they surrendered without a fight. If it was a child— well, I've founded a home for situations like these."

She blinked a few times, trying to comprehend what he'd told her. "You've founded your own orphanage?"

"Would you rather I abandoned them to fend for themselves?" He curled his upper lip in anger. "You can accuse me of many terrible things, but I always take responsibility for the children that fall into my path. They receive three meals a day, have planned activities, and even learn the basics of maths and reading. I make sure the staff are treating them fairly, and after they age out, I provide them with better jobs than most muggles. It's the safest home in the country. Some muggles even attack me on purpose in the hopes their children can get a spot."

He'd always been great at justifying his crimes. Always had a reason and a plan for everything. She couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"Do the children know you murdered their parents?"

"Some of them."

He didn't even seem ashamed.

Hermione stood up abruptly, feeling like bugs crawled along her skin, staring at the dead woman, wondering who she was. Wondering about her hopes and dreams. Her only crime had been scrounging out a place to live in a hellscape, and then protecting it from invaders.

"So you *create* the orphans," she said slowly, trying to understand. "And then you soothe your tortured conscience by taking care of them? I bet you also convince yourself that you're some type of hero by doing that. But that doesn't make you a hero. The opposite, in fact. You're absolutely deranged. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Titus calmly got out of the chair, wand still out, and stalked toward her, just daring her to continue. Other people would've been intimidated by his darkened expression, towering height, and muscle mass, but she'd faced his fury before and tilted her chin up.

"Deranged?" His nostrils flared, and he grabbed her jaw with one large hand, tugging her closer, mouth tilted down. "If I am, it's you who's made me insane."

She slapped him before he could get closer, but he didn't react and only tightened his grasp, lips close to hers, forcing her to twist and walk backward, just barely missing stepping on the woman's shrivelled hand, carpet spongy with thick blood and other fluids she didn't want to think about. Hermione would have tripped over her feet if it wasn't for Titus holding her steady as he brought her into the kitchen, shoes leaving a trail of sticky crimson footprints along the tile, leading her to the table.

"You're going to sit here, Sprite, and listen to me with no interruptions." He lifted her to the wooden edge, and as he did, she noticed something glinting at her side.

She didn't second guess her decision. Grabbing the discarded paring knife, she aimed for the weak section of his armour—the spot with the disabled charms. The small knife pierced through the leather into his side with effort.

Titus gave a guttural gasp, gripping her hand as tightly as a vice, ripping it away.

"You're lucky I'm merciful, and that I love you, because that would've been a death sentence for anyone else."

He shoved her down flat along the table, legs dangling off the side, caged into place by his hips. With his free hand, he tugged out the knife from his side, only allowing himself a single grunt of pain. The bloody blade clattered to the ground as he quickly patched the shallow wound with magic. Muggle blades rarely did permanent damage to wizards, and they were easy to heal.

But that hadn't been the point.

"I can't believe you just stabbed me," he said in shock.

"My only regret is that it didn't puncture something important."

"I've done nothing but protect you." He grit his teeth, having the audacity to look betrayed. "My whole life has been dedicated to keeping you safe and—"

"Stop protecting me!" she managed to shout, even with the tight clamp of his hand along her jaw. "I never asked you to. Stop hiding things from me and making decisions for me. I don't want *anything* from you."

"Stop protecting you— so you want to see what would've happened if I hadn't intervened? Is that it?" In the dark of the kitchen, his bright blue eyes almost looked black. "You want to see the usual fate of people found supporting the Order?" Titus dragged his thumb roughly over her bottom lip, careful not to get close to her teeth, knowing she'd bite him. "Perhaps I should, because nothing else has worked."

Hermione breathed hard, trapped against the table. She was finished with him playing pretend hero, keeping her at home as if a delicate object that needed to be kept behind glass while the world continued to turn without her knowing what occurred. Hiding from the atrocities didn't make them cease to exist. That protective glass had shattered long ago.

She was no longer his oblivious little Sprite, and she didn't want to be.

"We're both going to regret this." Titus' eyes stuck to her lips, and it looked as if he wished to try to kiss her, but instead he released his hold on her only for a second, tugging her up, and grasping the back of her neck as if she was a naughty puppy being corrected. "However, if it forces you to stop pointlessly fighting me at every turn, then I'll go ahead and demonstrate how privileged you are to have my affection."

---

---

After dropping Astria off at the stables, Titus grabbed her arm and apparated them to the Leaky. The auror on guard snapped to attention and didn't dare ask Titus for papers as they marched past him into muggle London.

Once outside, he pulled out a broom. "I don't want to hear a single protest about flying."

She straddled the broom in front of him, ignoring the way he cradled her tightly to his chest as they zoomed along the streets.

Dusk had already started to darken the edges of the sky, and the evening chill raised the hair along her arms.

"Prepare yourself," he said when they entered Trafalgar square. "You might see things you don't like."

They hurtled past video cameras attached to tall poles, similar to the camps. In the distance, she recognized a big black box television already showcasing the awaiting prisoners. Based on what Harry had told her about Titus experimenting with mass communication, the execution would probably be broadcast across Great Britain.

A large granite column rose into the sky near them with the statue of a man proudly perched on top. Four regal lions rested at its feet. The remnants of fountains were nearby, the water shut off long ago. She used to enjoy finding all of the hidden artwork the muggles had left behind, enjoying their clever use of various media, wondering how they achieved it without magic.

But unlike the days she'd lazily explored London in near solitude, hundreds of people packed the old square; mostly muggles, eerily silent and morose for such a large crowd. The majority kept their eyes down, as if to avoid attention.

Aurors in dark capes prowled around the edges, herding them closer to a makeshift platform where a row of masked Death Eaters stood like an impenetrable wall at the base.

On the long rectangular wooden scaffold, twenty men and women hung suspended in the air. Nothing supported them but magic, hands secured together above their heads. The "criminals" looked bedraggled, clothes ripped and stained with blood. Some displayed remnants of torture. A crimson X slashed across each forehead— a death mark.

"Do you recognize any of them?" Titus asked as they flew close to the crowd, landing smoothly near the base of the scaffold.

Hermione examined the condemned faces, and then she stumbled. He yanked her upright before she could hit the ground.

She noticed Ollivander first. He appeared more feeble than ever, arms held together above his head, thinned from age, the sparkle absent from his expression, though his prison outfit seemed clean, and it didn't look as if they'd beaten him.

Beside him were both the newlyweds— the couple she'd witnessed getting married. They kept their gazes on each other, as if the last image they wanted on this Earth was their spouse's face. The man's left eye was missing, probably extracted during torture.

And Luna— oh, Luna.

She floated the closest to Hermione, pale hair gleaming in the dying light, eyes shut with an unnatural grin on her face, possibly humming under her breath. Beyond a few minor cuts on her hands, she appeared free of wounds.

Hermione searched the other faces frantically, but didn't recognize any of the others.

"You can't do this!" Hermione struggled against his hold, intending to fight, but he held her firmly.

"I *will* do this, and you're going to sit and watch what happens to traitors. For your sake, I'll hasten the deaths and limit the blood, though it's usually much worse."

He conjured a chair near the edge of the platform, dragged her up the creaking steps, and forced her to sit on it, adding a spell to keep her stuck in place. Panic engulfed her, viewing the rows of floating people.

She'd never been to an execution, but she assumed many had far less people in the lineup. How did they arrest the newlyweds and—

When understanding struck, she placed a finger to her lips, stomach roiling.

"They were captured because of my memories. This is what you meant by an infestation."

Titus tugged off the mask near his belt and secured it over his face. "As Weasley said, the wards were failing at a base in the west. It didn't take long to figure out which one he referenced, given our other intelligence. The faulty wards cracked under surprisingly little pressure, and I... *interrupted* the evacuation process. The residents were either arrested or killed, along with any other Order members there to help."

"Did Charlie—"

"Weasley got away, unfortunately. His dragon ate one of my aurors and burned another in the process." Titus grinned, seeming oddly amused by that, as if playing cat and mouse with Charlie Weasley excited him. "Chapman," he addressed a nearby auror who scrambled to attention. "Have we discovered what caused the cameras to malfunction?"

"Not yet," the man answered. "But everything is fixed now like you ordered. We're not entirely sure if it was a person, because the muggle tech is still sometimes sensitive to magic, despite our precautions."

Titus considered that, calculating what to do. "It's almost dark. Will we need to postpone it until tomorrow?"

"No sir. When the sun goes down, a few well-positioned lumos should illuminate the area enough."

Hermione studied the prisoners again. Ollivander kept giving her horrid pitying glances. And Luna—

Titus was still staring at the cameras, puzzling something out. "Perhaps, we should also—"

"You told me you'd never kill an innocent person!" Hermione infused the accusation with all of her vitriol.

Titus gave away his irritation at the interruption with a slow curl of his fist. "I don't see anyone who fits that description."

"Luna— something's wrong with her mind. She'd never hurt anything."

Wizards occasionally went mad. Some had curses attached to their bloodlines. Hermione didn't think Luna was insane, but her father's death warped her. She lived halfway between reality and dreamland.

"The Lovegood girl?" Titus drummed his fingers along his thigh.

"Didn't you interrogate her?"

"I didn't question *everyone* myself. I don't have the time."

She saw his hesitation and capitalised on it. "Then question her now, and you'll see I'm telling you the truth."

The mask impeded her ability to read him, but he gave a small nod, walking closer to Luna. She wore a white dress, free of rips or stains, that tangled around her legs with the wind, looking serene and too calm for the situation. Her eyes were open now, stuck on a dark grey cloud above her, whispering something unintelligible under her breath.

Titus examined her for a long time with his wand hanging by his side. "Who are you talking to?"

"A Blibbering Humdinger."

He froze as if struck with a petrifying curse. "What the fuck are Blibbering Humdingers?"

As with the nargles, Hermione had never heard of them. And neither had Titus. Even masked, she sensed his bewilderment.

"You can only see them if you believe in them. My father always said it's because they're shy. They usually like to create mischief, but today—" She didn't finish, gasping on the next word, giving away her fear.

Titus stayed frozen, besides his drumming fingers. The crowd behind then began to murmur, punctuated by shouts from the prowling aurors to stay silent.

"Goyle?" Titus twisted around to focus on the giant in the row of Death Eaters. His son, Gregory, towered beside him without a mask. Goyle Sr. had a meaty hand on his son's large shoulder, as if to prevent him from moving. "This girl is Xenophilius' daughter, correct?"

Greg's wide eyes kept darting to Luna, his bottom lip quivering. Pink splotches erupted down his neck, as if overheated even with the chilly air.

"She's the last of the Lovegoods," Goyle Sr. confirmed. "A pureblood. Xenophilius disappeared with his daughter before her fifth year at Hogwarts."

"I remember now. He'd been printing an underground newspaper in support of the Order." Once again, Titus rubbed his gloved fingers together. "Your son went to school with her. Can he tell me if she's of sound mind?"

Greg's face leached of colour as his father patted his shoulder to speak. "We called her Loony Lovegood."

With the confirmation, Titus dropped his wand further, examining Luna again. "Knowing she's mentally compromised, I'm not sure I'm comfortable with executing her, and I'll be questioning the auror in charge of her interrogation. I want to know why this wasn't brought to my attention sooner. There's also the issue of what to do with—"

"We'll house her," Goyle Sr. interrupted. "Her mother, Pandora, was a childhood friend of my wife's. We always thought Xenophilius was a bad match."

"The girl was a part of the Order," Titus warned. "She might be rebellious. This might all be a ruse. Are you sure you want to deal with that?"

"By the looks of her, I hardly think she'll give us much trouble. Her father chose to be in the Order. She had little choice in the matter. Like you said, I don't think she's capable of making those decisions. My wife will ensure the girl is reeducated, if possible."

Hermione believed Luna was capable of rational thought. She just used her imagination as a refuge, a way to disassociate from the horrors, or maybe she even had a dash of seer blood that interfered with her perception of reality. Perhaps in another world, she would've just been considered eccentric, but the trauma she'd endured made it worse.

Though Hermione would let Titus believe whatever he wanted if it saved Luna's life.

Titus contemplated what he'd learned in silence, and then he snapped his fingers at a low-ranking auror. "Get her down."

The man jumped into action at the command. Luna thanked the guard in a sweet voice as he floated her to the platform, released the invisible constraints, and led her trembling form down the wooden stairs. The red X on her forehead disappeared when her bare feet stepped on the ground.

Her bright blonde hair still shone under the dying sun as she stood in front of the Goyles, looking far too small and vulnerable. "Why, hello, Gregory."

His face blanched again, eyes widening with the simple greeting, looking like he might be ill.

Luna managed a small smile, and then she glanced at the platform, filled with people she knew. For just a second, Hermione watched reality snap into place, horror replacing the calm.

"Do you think—"

"Quiet, girl," Goyle Sr. Said in an oddly soft voice.

Luna didn't fight Greg as he gently pulled her behind his large frame, as if shielding her from what was about to happen. His father stepped in front of them both.

"It's getting far too late, and I don't want any more distractions. I'd like to get home in time for dinner," Titus said while studying the Goyles, expression hidden by his mask before slowly marching to the center of the platform, waiting for the aurors to settle the mass of people. In his black Death Eater mask, sharp uniform, and intimidating armour, he looked every bit the monster she'd first met as a child, except even larger now— a god of war, unsatisfied with the amount of corpses already under his boots.

When assured that he'd gained control of the crowd, Titus placed the tip of his wand to his throat, amplifying his voice, echoing around the old buildings.

"Wizarding kind has done a great deal for muggles." He paused, body tense, always ready for a surprise attack. "We've created jobs, stabilised the economy, and managed the production of foods and goods, pulling you from the depths of depravity. We've employed rations, making sure everyone is fed, from the oldest down to the youngest. And recently, we've—"

A man began shouting expletives from the crowd. Within seconds, an auror silenced him, bound him, and dragged him from the crowd out of sight.

Titus waited for the commotion to die down, a silent dare in his unmoving stance for anyone else to give their opinion.

No one did. Once again, it was eerily silent.

"Behind me hang traitors to our great and enduring nation. Tonight, when you're eating your rationed meal, remember that it is the *Order* who is stealing your resources for themselves, allowing your children to starve." He pointed his finger to the nearest floating prisoner.

"The *Order* who is sowing disunity and disruption. In their insatiable quest for power, they are willing to allow the dark days to return, no matter the cost to the average citizen — but I refuse to watch as society descends into criminality."

Titus stalked along the row of people, twirling his wand in a deceptive easy manner, stopping in front of a young man in the center. He looked to be in his early twenties with brown hair and freckles, and he tried and failed to spit on Titus as he neared.

"Tonight I volunteer to be your shield from the encroaching dark." His voice twisted into something unforgiving. "My wand will be a conduit of justice, and I give my solemn promise

that I will *not* rest until every terrorist in this country is routed out and exterminated like the invasive rodents they are."

"You sick bast—"

Titus slashed his wand. "Diffindo."

A red line sliced along the pale throat, choking off any words. The man seized against his bonds, blood pouring from the deep wound.

Hermione felt woozy, as if she'd faint at the sight.

Over the course of two more curses, Titus deepened the wound, severing through flesh and tendons, until the man's head completely detached, landing with a sickening thud on the scaffold below. As the decapitated corpse remained suspended in the air, blood sprayed and dripped everywhere, and the Butcher once again prowled along the platform for his next victim.

In response to the violent death, the crowd gave deafening shouts, so loud it hurt her ears. While most were screams of horror, a few of the people seemed to cheer at the carnage— as if this was some form of sick entertainment.

Hermione wished to spit on them. *He'd kill you too*, she wanted to shout. *He'd kill you all without a second thought*.

The butcher slaughtered out of order, stalking along the row of bodies, until he paused in front of one at random. Some of the condemned wept or cried or screamed or begged for mercy. Some shouted obscenities or glared or spit— but they all died the same. A red line carved along the throat, legs jerking, blood splashing across the platform, the head landing against the wood below.

It happened again and again and again, until Hermione's voice was hoarse from screaming along with the crowd, watching as a small river of blood trickled closer to her feet.

The sky darkened with each dead prisoner, the sun extinguishing its light in grief. After the tenth execution, the sun disappeared completely under the horizon, the brilliant colours muting to grey.

Hermione had always known Titus was ruthless. She'd known that he found little muggleborns and brought them back to the ministry. And she'd also known he'd overseen executions and punishments for Order members and muggle rebels.

But she'd never had to confront the cold, brutal reality of Titus Nott— the merciless Butcher. Not in this callous way. He didn't prolong his victim's suffering, nor did he listen to their dying pleas. He moved along the platform, becoming something inhuman, neither enjoying it nor regretting it.

Another veil ripped in half in her mind, exposing the ugly truth behind it. Her childhood had been mostly a lie. The person she thought Titus to be didn't truly exist. Before this, all of his



violence, besides Krum, had been abstract to her. What was the reality of the victims when she couldn't see their deaths or their faces? They'd transformed into numbers, numbing the truth. Even the camps felt removed from Titus, becoming just a product of pureblood superiority.

But there was no way to hide from reality now.

When Titus stopped in front of the married couple, Hermione closed her eyes, acid burning her mouth, unable to stomach the woman's terror as Titus pointed his wand at her, selecting his next fatality.

The sight of the woman suspended in the air, trying to use her limited range of motion to move away from Titus' wand, was a stark dichotomy to her soft smile as she walked down the aisle in her homespun dress with such palpable happiness and love.

"Mercy," Hermione cried. "Give them mercy. Don't kill them—"

He ignored her pleas and didn't hesitate. "Diffindo."

The woman choked on her scream, the sound garbled with blood. Her husband wailed with grief— deep wrenching noises— begging to be next.

Titus granted him the request mercifully fast, waiting patiently for both of their heads to detach before walking toward his last victim, the only living person left on the scaffold.

Ollivander seemed accepting of his fate, refusing to show any emotion. No cries or begging or spitting.

"It would be a shame to kill you," Titus admitted, speaking for the first time since the execution had begun. "Renounce what you've done, make a vow to never give a muggleborn a wand again, and I'll allow you to continue to work at your shop."

*Take the deal*, Hermione whispered under her breath. She couldn't live with his death on her conscience.

Ollivander raised his chin, appearing regal, even while thin and haggard in his prisoner's uniform. "For too long I've stepped aside and watched atrocities happen, many by your wand, and I'm ashamed of myself for my silence. Helping the young muggleborns was the greatest thing that I've done in this horrible world, and I will *not* renounce it."

"As you wish." Titus' knuckles whitened as he placed the wand against his jugular.

Determined to prevent his death, Hermione purposely tipped over her chair. It clattered to the side, trapping her fingers under the wood. Smashing her fingers, she shouted with true pain.

The distraction worked. Titus' wand lifted away from Ollivander's throat and pointed at the auror attempting to help her up.

"Don't fucking touch her," he threatened. The man backed away, hands up, as Titus marched his way toward her. He lifted her chair with a swish of his wand, and then examined her

hands, moving each finger carefully to see if any were broken. "Your pinky is injured. What were you trying to do?"

She barely felt it compared to her emotional distress. "Don't kill Ollivander."

Titus glared at her through the mask, the blue highlighted by the stark black. "I gave him the option to save his life, but he wants to be as noble and foolish as you."

"It was my fault that he's—"

"Do I need to silencio you for this as well?"

She must look like a mess: face red from screaming, lips injured from biting them, eyes wild with panic.

He rubbed his bloody thumb across her cheek, and she flinched at the touch, knowing he'd transferred the remnants of death to her face. He reeked of slaughter, his robes too dark to see the splatters, but scarlet droplets rolled off his mask like dripping tears. The same hand that held her gently had just murdered eighteen people, their blood congealing on the wood, their severed heads in various positions, mouths still open in their final screams. She refused to stare too long at their distorted faces.

Her mind plummeted into darkness, heart beating erratically, and her chest ached.

The horror of it all proved to be too much.

"Breathe, Sprite," Titus whispered. "Just breathe." His gloved hands kept stroking her face. "There we go," he said when she finally got herself under control enough to grab the hand on her cheek.

"If you kill Ollivander, you'll be eliminating centuries' worth of wandmaking knowledge. It's a rare skill. It would be a travesty to—think about the consequences to the wizarding world. Who would even replace him? Please, I'll do anything if you let him live."

"Anything?" Titus paused, eyes flashing. "Will you cease attempting to escape?"

"Yes," she lied.

He searched her expression for potential betrayal, but her desperation must have hidden her tells.

"For your soft heart, I'll allow a rare mercy." He pointed his wand at Ollivander, releasing the magical bindings. The venerated wandmaker tumbled to the platform, landing in a puddle of gore. He raised his hands that had caught his fall and stared at the blood that had originated from the hanging corpses beside him. Two aurors collected him, lifting him by his armpits to standing.

"Kill me," Ollivander shouted. "I don't want to live!"

"I might someday still kill you," Titus answered. "But Hermione makes a fair point. Before you die, you'll need to pass on your knowledge. We'll find you an appropriate apprentice soon. Take him away."

She didn't know if she'd made the right choice as Ollivander resisted the men who carried him down the staircase with more respect than they afforded the other prisoners, disappearing into the crowd.

Titus grabbed the back of her neck, forcing her to pay attention to him. She kept trembling from adrenaline.

"That will be the last life I save for you. Do you understand?" His voice resembled a sharp sword to her throat.

She agreed with a nod, still finding it difficult to take in a breath.

He rested his forehead against hers, the mask ice cold against her skin, closing his eyes. "This will also be the last time I let you see an execution. Your heart is too tender for it, and I think you understand now what could have been, if it weren't for me. After today, there will be no more rebellion. I won't allow it. You have as much time as you need to sort through your emotions, but it will be within my boundaries of safety. With me, you'll never be in danger, and you'll always be cherished and loved. I promise it."

Each word felt like another golden lock on her prison. Since her imprisonment, she'd kept a secret hope lit inside her heart, clinging to Draco's promise. But how could she escape? How could she fight? It seemed impossible against such power and violence, the stakes far too high to scale.

What if one day they suspended Draco in the air, the crowd jeering, as Titus pointed his wand at him—

Her eyes snapped to the floating dead bodies. "You really are a monster."

"Both our hands are stained, my love. I'm no more or less a monster than you. In that way, we're equal."

He was unable to see the difference between their killings, because he equated both acts to self defence. He truly believed he was a shield for the wizarding world, his wand a conduit of justice, and everything he did was necessary.

She was tired, deep in her bones. A type that rest wouldn't solve.

"I want to go—"

Shouts from the crowd interrupted her.

Titus snapped his head up at the disturbance, watching as Daphne Greengrass' father marched toward them, a Death Eater leading them forward, shoving aside any person in the way. The crowd parted, unwilling to get so close to a pureblood. Greengrass held a chain like a leash, tugging his prisoner along.

Even with the bruises on his face, she recognized Finch by his messy sandy hair and long skinny body, a metal collar locked on his throat with a chain attached to it. They led her friend through the heckling crowd toward the platform.

"What are they doing?" Hermione gasped.

Titus narrowed his eyes. "I'm not sure, but whatever they plan isn't allowed."

Hermione grabbed the top of his uniform over his armour near his collar bone and tugged him roughly down to her eye level again. Her panic had subsided, replaced by a cold determination, realising that despite the multiple deaths that occurred, she'd somehow managed to save both Luna and Ollivander.

And she'd save Finch too, even if it cost her everything.

"I don't care if you said Ollivander was the last man you'd save for me. If a single hair on Finch's head is misplaced, I'll make you regret it for the rest of your life. Do *you* understand?"

Hermione's voice was as cold as winter, as intentional as an unforgivable. Titus reached out and grabbed a curl.

"I promise he won't be harmed, Sprite. I'm not sure what's happening, but I'm going to find out."

The grey of dusk relented to the dark, as Titus straightened, letting her go. A few lumos lit up the edges of the awaiting crowd, though visibility grew limited. Even though the execution was over, the people still hadn't dispersed.

When Greengrass reached the stairs of the platform, Finch dug in his feet, seeing the blood and gore awaiting him. The leash roughly tugged on his neck, forcing him forward and up.

"What's the meaning of this?" Titus demanded, standing in the center of the platform, waiting for Finch and Greengrass to reach him.

"I'm punishing this ungrateful mudblood," he answered while dragging his ward, stumbling up the stairs.

"Punishments are finished for the day and so are executions."

Daphne's father again yanked on the chain, and Finch tumbled closer, almost tripping on a severed head. "Then allow an exception. This ungrateful vermin attempted to run away, just as we were finalising his sale to another family in need of his service. After all we've done. After all we've given him—"

"Punishment won't be necessary. I'll take him off your hands. What's his price?"

Greengrass shook his head. "I promised the scum I'd drag him to execution day and beat him in front of everyone. We can settle on a price after— if you'd even still want him."

"I *said* punishments are over." Titus' tone allowed no argument. He took off his bloody mask, attaching it to his belt, exposing an equally unforgiving expression. "Go home, and we'll settle this privately. I'll pay double what any family would offer you."

The Greengrass patriarch cowed under the stare, losing his bluster. "But you don't have any use for him."

"Our elves are in desperate need of a competent groundskeeper for the gardens. He partially grew up at the manor, so he'd already be familiar with his task. And I could always loan him out if—"

A bloodcurdling scream erupted from the crowd. And then another. And another. Mayhem ensued as people shoved and trampled each other to escape past the aurors. The darkness made it hard to see the cause, despite the floating balls of lumos.

"What now?" Titus visibly displayed his annoyance at the continued interruptions.

A screech echoed above the screams— an unnatural sound that raised all the hair along her body. An old instinct that warned of danger zapped down her legs, urging her to stand, but she remained seated, trapped against the chair.

The pandemonium spread. Hermione didn't realise how serious it might be until the aurors abandoned their posts at the edges of the crowd, running away with the muggles.

Titus searched for the source, and then he went pale, seeing something terrible within the mass of people—the origin of panic.

"What is th— fuck, run Sprite!"

"I can't."

Titus flicked his wand at her, releasing the sticking charm attaching her to the chair. However, by that time, he'd already reached her, scooping her up with one arm and shoving her over his shoulder. Hermione frantically studied the crowd from her higher vantage point on his shoulder as he sprinted toward the edge of the platform.

"What's happening?"

Another high-pitched screech answered her question, and the crowd parted enough to expose an odd human that lumbered toward them with an uneven gait and a blood-stained mouth, filled with sharpened teeth.

No— not a human.

It was an animated corpse, freshly dead. Long bedraggled hair framed its face, offsetting opaque eyes that glowed in the dark and skin already beginning to rot, though it retained enough identifying features to recognize a man from her nightmares.

The inferi of Rabastan Lestrange ripped into people in his way, biting their flesh, shoving them aside, but it didn't pursue the muggles running past him; instead, it focused on the

scaffold, tilting its rotting head to the side. As if finally zeroing in on its target, it made the inhuman screech again. The sound slicked down her spine into every nerve of her body.

The creature bolted toward them at incredible speed, leaping onto the platform with more athleticism than a corpse should possess. Titus dodged the inferi, jumping into the crowd, barreling into stragglers while still clutching Hermione close.

People still fled in the distance, but the dispersed crowd left a large clearing close to the old shops. Many of the aurors had fled too in terror, but many more stayed behind, sending curses at the inferi, but nothing stuck.

"I have to fight it," he said, sliding her off his shoulder. "Find somewhere safe and hide!" She tumbled to the side, landing hard against concrete, scraping her elbows with the fall.

They both realised at the same time that the inferi wasn't interested in her.

It was *hunting* Titus.

He sprinted down the old street away from her, stopping in front of an abandoned red bus. Rabastan LeStrange followed close behind, and Titus scrambled away, moving the creature toward the other aurors. He flung a multitude of dark curses. Lacerating ones. Exploding ones. Some she couldn't recognize. The red and green lashed against Rabastan's corpse to no avail. The inferi kept lunging, and Titus tripped and rolled away from the snapping teeth and the unnaturally strong hands.

"Fire," someone bellowed. "They're killed by fire!"

But an incendio did nothing— and neither did any stronger spells.

Years of training benefitted Titus, his reflexes sharp as he rolled and dodged and fought, until at last he raised his wand.

"Fiendfyre!" he roared. A magnificent dragon made of enchanted flames rose up. With an open mouth, it swooped down, and grabbed the inferi in its fiery jaws. The corpse disintegrated on contact, and the scorching dragon made a few swooping circles as Titus struggled to control the curse. Sweat dripped down his skin from both the heat and concentration.

Not since the memory of Dumbledore and Voldemort's battle had Hermione seen such an impressive mastery of dark magic. The ability to control Fiendfyre showed Titus' natural power as he kept it firmly contained to a circle around him. The leftover energy crackled in the air as the flames slowly sucked back into his wand over the span of a minute, finally subduing the curse, leaving the ashes of the inferi behind.

"Bloody fuck." Titus collapsed on the ground, head resting against the concrete as if he struggled to raise it. He was panting, hyperventilating. In all her years, she'd never seen him behave like this, as if he'd just experienced mortality for the first time. "Where the fuck did that come from, and why was it coming for me? And why did an incendio have no effect?"

No one answered, because no one seemed to have any idea.

Average inferi were sensitive to fire, but this one must have been altered to withstand typical spells.

From what little she'd studied about inferi, they required complex dark magic to create them, much more malevolent than she'd ever attempted. Some of the creatures could speak or make noises, though they were like puppets, with no will of their own. Their base form would kill indiscriminately, but some followed orders to target specific people.

Most of all, they *needed* the dark.

Titus regained his equilibrium and stood up. "Spread out," he demanded. "Secure the perimeter. We need to make sure it was the only one. The wizard who controlled it might still be close—and cut the fucking cameras."

Hermione remained in the middle of the organised chaos, unsure where to go, while the men in dark capes set up boundary spells and searched the nooks and crevices of the square. Having nothing else to do, she made her way to the concrete steps, suppressing her shivers, barely blinking.

Forgotten by his master, Finch walked over and sat beside her, rolling the heavy chain around his wrist to hold it better. Greengrass had joined the aurors in their search, so her friend sat by her silently, and they held hands, both shocked and traumatised by their experiences.

"I won't let him hurt you," she whispered after several minutes. "I'm going to save you."

"I know you'll try." Finch gave a sad grin and brought her hand to his mouth, kissing her knuckles.

The wait didn't last too long.

"We found something," an auror shouted in alarm.

Hermione didn't think Titus would have allowed her to wander closer if he hadn't been so distracted and busy, but no one paid attention as both Finch and she walked the length of the square to the side of a muggle building where the mass of black cloaked aurors gathered.

Titus was there already, standing in front. He raised his wand with a *lumos*, illuminating the old brick to reveal a decapitated corpse of a man magically stuck spread eagle to the side of the building. His missing head had been placed on the ground between his feet with a death eater mask covering the face.

Hermione stared at the remnants of slaughter with unflinching focus as Goyle Sr. kicked off the mask with the toe of his boot. It clattered to the side, unveiling a face disfigured from torture. Eyes drooping, tongue ripped out, and a red X slashed across the forehead.

But she recognized him and so did everyone else.

"Roldolphus," Titus confirmed, voice lowered in rage. "Someone murdered both the Lestrangle brothers, managed to turn one into an inferi with an order to kill me, and left the other here as a final threat." His hand tightened on his wand. "There's a wizard out there that just signed his own death sentence."

Titus raised his wand higher, brightening the crime scene even more, displaying a note left behind on the brick, scrawled in intimately familiar handwriting above the empty neck.

Hermione's heart began to beat again while reading the warning written in dripping blood:

***I CAN BE A BUTCHER TOO***

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Graphic Depictions of Violence, Death



# Chapter 47: The Price of Love

## Chapter Notes

Song suggestions:

Kalandra- "Borders"

Slipknot- "Vermillion Pt. 2"

Chevelle- "Send the Pain Below"

Thank you to the best beta in the world, Sheila, and my alpha team for help on this chapter! And thank you, readers, for your patience while I was on vacation.

FYI: This is one of the most important chapters for Hermione's character development.

Please check Trigger Warnings at the end:

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

## The Price of Love

The Death Eaters remained on edge as they roamed the old streets of London, searching for any sign of the wizard who had killed and mutilated the Lestrangle brothers.

In the organised chaos, Titus transferred Finch and her to the edge of the execution platform. The scent of death permeated the air, the pile of corpses reeking so strongly it stung her nose and mouth. She forced down a reflexive gag while facing his glare.

"If you want to stay unbound, you'll remain in that exact spot until I can collect you," he warned with a finger pointed in her direction. "The boundary spell is still in place, so attempting to run away will not only be foolish, but will result in more restrictions."

"Why can't you just bring me back to the manor?"

"I don't have the time, and I don't trust anyone else to do it right now."

Good, because she didn't want to leave; she wanted more clues to the wizard's identity too. Her eyes kept flicking to the bloody lettering above Rodolphus' headless corpse, still stuck to the side of the building.

*I can be a Butcher too.*

It could be anyone, but she *knew* that handwriting, had seen it unfurl along parchment, ink staining pale, elegant fingers. A dark thrill zipped through her at the idea that Draco might be

the culprit, though the potential consequences made her feel sick.

Hermione sat down where she'd been left, deciding not to test any boundaries while at an active crime scene. She attempted to ignore the ever-growing stench leaching into every cell of her body from behind her. A puddle of blood close to her foot glinted under a hovering ball of lumos, steadily dripping off the platform, and she examined it while processing the events.

Finch remained standing beside her with a placid expression, calm as the creek she'd visited earlier in the day. He'd always been the voice of logic in their coven, so introverted and odd he struggled to communicate beyond his interests.

"Are you okay?" she voiced her concern, pulling him from deep thought. He crouched down so they were at eye level.

It was an idiotic question. Of course, he wasn't okay.

He grabbed her hand again, the heat of his palm seeping through her skin. "I'm better than I thought I'd be— thanks to you. I have a lot to thank you for, really, and I'm glad you're here so that I can do it properly."

She blinked a few times in confusion and frowned. "Thank me? Whatever for?"

He smiled sadly. "Teaching me magic. Giving me a wand. Welcoming me as your friend, even though I wasn't very nice to you at first."

She scoffed. "You don't have to thank me for being your friend, Finch. You've given me just as much as I could ever give you."

"My gratitude stands."

Something about the way he spoke made her uncomfortable.

"Well, I'm not sure I was a very good teacher."

"You were a terrible teacher." He leaned closer. "But even still, I've actually gotten quite good on my own."

His statement made no sense.

"But Titus has your wand—"

"I steal my master's at night." Finch grinned at her horrified gasp. "He's careless where he sets it down and hasn't even noticed the allegiance has shifted. Really, I thought you'd be proud of me. I've been acting like you, stealing dark art books from their library, and I've mastered many of the spells... even two of the unforgivables."

"*Unforgivables*?" Hermione almost jumped to her feet in shock.

“You were right. I just needed intention— though I never had the heart for Crucio. Once I learned to clear my mind, Imperio was easier than I thought it would be.”

She did a quick analysis of the implications, her brain hurtling to conclusions. If he didn’t have the heart for Crucio, that meant—

“You’ve managed an Avada.” Her open-mouthed stare must look comical.

Finch nodded with a grimace. “I practised on animals, but only to help them. I first talked a gnome out of a poisoned trap with an Imperio, and then I found a dying rat in my room a month ago. There was nothing I could do to heal it, and I— well, I only had to think of my hate for my masters. It sliced my soul a little in the process, but I don’t regret it. I’ve had to do it several times since.”

The purebloods would consider stealing a master’s wand a far worse crime than running away. Even Titus might not be able to save him from the fallout if they discovered he’d been practising Avadas.

“What you’re doing is *very* dangerous.”

“That’s usually the warning I need to give you. For once, I’ve been more reckless, but I’ve been given no other choice.”

It might be hypocritical of her to ask for caution, but she had to express her worry. “I just don’t like the thought of you getting caught. Promise me you won’t do anything more. Titus will—”

“Don’t pretend Nott Manor’s my sanctuary. Didn’t you hear him? He said he’d *loan* me out to families in need of my service. I’m not being saved at all.”

Hermione didn’t have an answer for that, because he was right. Titus didn’t approve of abuse of muggleborns, but he still believed in the necessity of continuing the wizarding bloodlines.

An idea entered her mind. It might cost her a great deal, but she’d pay the price if it meant her friend remained free.

“I’ll make a deal with him to—”

“No deals. I couldn’t bear the thought of you sacrificing anything for me. But I’m also not sure I can imagine this being my whole life— traded around to produce children, but never being able to be a real fath—the healers think my baby’s a girl.” He let go of her hand to swipe at a rogue tear. “I’ve had dreams of her little fingers. Her first smile. Wobbly steps. I didn’t think I’d want so much to call her mine.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said, unable to think of what to say. An aura of pain swallowed him. She wished she could wash away the torment and return them both to when he’d been just a boy excited about catching a caterpillar.

“Hermione,” he said slowly. “Promise me you’ll find a way to make sure she’s taken care of properly. Daphne’s very immature and selfish. Doesn’t like any responsibility or even *want* a

child. And Mr. Greengrass is already angry that it's possibly not a boy to carry on the family name. I think he would've terminated the pregnancy if it was allowed."

"She's practically my niece. Of course, I'll look out for her." Something tilted off balance, and she couldn't put her finger on it. "You're right about the manor. It's not a sanctuary. But after today, we'll be able to figure out everything together." She stopped short of promising to kidnap the child to raise at Nott manor, knowing it wouldn't be a possibility.

Finch had been far more tender than usual, even held her hand and kissed it. She'd been in a trance earlier, unable to question the rare affection, but goosebumps erupted along her arms.

"I'll find a way for you to see your baby, Finch. Just give me some time to think of a plan. I helped Julie, and I'll help you too."

"You can't solve every problem. Some things can't be healed, helped, or answered."

"I refuse to believe that. There's a solution to everything. We just need to figure it out. Soon you'll be away from those monsters. And then you'll be with me every day, like we used to be." The thought caused a warmth to wash over her, a thread of hope. Life always turned brighter in the presence of her friends.

"It's a nice thought, isn't it? To return to our past."

"It is," she whispered. "It can be that again."

Even after they stopped talking, Hermione remained unsettled about something in his tone and manner.

---

It took another hour to scour the buildings in the area cordoned off. Without success, Titus retreated to stand close by Hermione, arms crossed, calculating what to do next as the higher-ranked aurors shifted nervously in a semi-circle around him. The stars gleamed in the dark now, and she searched out constellations in her boredom.

"It doesn't make any sense. The wizard who did this had to be close." Titus uncrossed his arms, letting them dangle at his sides, clenching his wand so hard the veins in his hand raised. "Average Inferi can withstand distance, but advanced charms on inferi need proximity, since it's linked by soul magic."

"It could be a *witch*." Even masked, she recognized the hulking figure of Thorfinn Rowle. "Bellatrix is still on the run."

"I admit she has motive when it comes to Rodolphus. She's also insane enough to send an inferi." He studied the corpse still stuck to the side of the building and frowned. "But she has no reason to hunt *me*."

"Do you have any other suspects?"

For the first time since the investigation began, Titus glanced down at Hermione, picking apart every micro-expression. She kept her features unresponsive as he took his time examining her, eyes narrowing until he finally ripped his gaze away.

Hermione tried to breathe normally. Afraid she'd give away her suspicions with a twitch of her lips, she looked down at the dark puddle of blood, following the steady drips from the platform as they splashed into the center.

"I have a suspect, but I won't make any accusations until I have solid proof."

Plenty of people had motive to kill Titus, but this had been personal and targeted, executed by a talented wizard with connections to dark magic and possibly ancient family grimoires. A wizard from an old family.

It narrowed down the possibilities.

So focused on her worries and the dripping blood, trapped in her thoughts, she didn't notice the majority of the aurors had returned to the ministry, leaving only a few behind. Titus loomed over her with a hand outstretched for her to take.

"Are you ready to go home now? I have time to drop you off."

Her chest hurt at the word home, wishing for a different manor.

"Yes." Hermione was cold, tired, and mentally hanging on by a thread, and wanted nothing more than to enter a dreamworld where she could forget about beheaded Order members.

"Why can't Finch come back with us now?"

As she let Titus pull her to standing, his expression softened. "I can't officially take him with me until the sale is finalised and approved by the ministry. It will only be a single night."

Finch remained crouched beside her without any reaction, as if lost inside himself, staying quiet and pensive.

It didn't take long for Greengrass to appear beside Titus. He seemed surlier than before, face red with anger, since his evening plans had turned into an unsuccessful manhunt.

"Get up, you worthless—"

"Careful," Titus warned in a dark tone. "If you want my full payment tomorrow, you'll leave him unblemished and ready for work. If I find a single mark on him, Greengrass, you'll see what happens to people who damage what's *mine*."

She didn't think the Greengrass patriarch was used to people threatening him, but he was smart enough not to argue with the Butcher and gave a nod of agreement.

Finch straightened at his master's frustrated summons. His legs had always been too long for his body, with lanky, skinny arms to match, and he towered above even Titus now. Greengrass grabbed the chain attached to the shackle around his neck and yanked a single time.

“I’m so sorry. Tell Dean that I love him,” Finch whispered as he walked by Hermione. “I can’t—”

“Come on, you cretin. I don’t have all night.”

The chain yanked again, and Finch stumbled away before he could finish his statement.

Titus’ hand transferred to her back, trying to lead her away as well, but she couldn’t rip her eyes from her friend’s back walking past the execution platform, flies swarming around the corpses. The awful stench moulded inside her body, mingling with a dread that poisoned her blood.

When she refused to move, Titus ran his fingers along the curve of her waist. “No need to worry about your friend. Greengrass won’t risk my anger by hurting him. Tomorrow I’ll bring him home. A companion will be good for you, I think. If I remember correctly, the boy liked botany and entomology. Perhaps I could hire a tutor for the two of you again—”

Hermione lurched out of his hold with a shout. With her focus on Finch, she’d seen the movement of his wrist before anyone else had, but she could only look on as if watching an impending broom accident— helpless to stop what was about to happen.

“Accio wand!” A flash of dark wood sprung from Greengrass’ pocket, landing into Finch’s hand, followed by two practised swishes and a flick. “Cateno Suffoco!”

The metal leash ripped out of Greengrass’ hand and rose up, snapping forward with a crack, and after wrapping twice around the patriarch’s throat, constricted his neck like a curling snake.

Titus’ reflexes responded in a flash as he flicked his wand, but she smacked his hand to the side just in time, sending the binding curse that had been aimed at her friend to dissipate into an empty building.

Titus twisted and glared at her. “Don’t interfere again. In fact, I won’t give you the option.” Ropes wrapped around her arms and waist, as Titus wasted precious moments securing her.

In the distance, the remaining aurors patrolling the edges of the boundary spell raced toward the commotion, wands raised, but they were too far to land their curses effectively.

She snarled at him. “Don’t you dare—”

“The stupid boy’s left me with no choice but to arrest him.”

Finch hadn’t capitalised on the distraction she’d provided. He remained in place, as if accepting the inevitable outcome, calmly watching his master strangling to death. Greengrass was writhing on the ground, face turning purple, legs twitching, fingers clawing at the heavy chain around his throat. Spells in red and blue hurtled past Finch, but he kept staring placidly, until he glanced up and transferred the tip of Greengrass’ wand to his temple, eyes connected with Hermione full of pain and apology.

Hermione understood now what Finch planned to do— what had seemed off this whole time.

He'd been telling her *goodbye*.

"Expelliarmus!" Titus shouted.

"Avada Kedavra."

A flash of green surrounded Finch just as Greengrass' wand hurtled out of his grasp. His face slackened in the sickening brightness, eyes blank, rolling up to show the whites. His body tipped backward, collapsing with a nauseating crack next to a now still Greengrass.

"Bloody fuck!" Titus ran toward the scene, but Hermione couldn't comprehend what had just happened, frozen in place.

The aurors arrived and unwound the chain on Greengrass, trying to revive him without success, while Titus bent down over Finch, doing a diagnostic spell. He examined him for several long seconds until he slowly glanced back at Hermione, eyes wide, shaking his head.

She collapsed without thought, her bindings vanishing before impact with the concrete below. But she doubted she'd feel any pain. In fact, she welcomed the sharp physical sensation as she crawled forward, scraping her knees as she went.

"Help him," she begged. He had to be asleep, passed out from the blow to his head.

Devastation clouded Titus' face as he stood. "There's nothing I can do. He's gone, Sprite."

"No, no, he can't be. It's not possible. You can't Avada yourself."

"You can. You can do any spells on yourself if your wand allows it. He only had to really mean it."

Even if the wand had shifted allegiance, it wasn't truly his, giving him no protection, which meant Titus was right— it was possible.

And Finch had practised the spell before. Several times.

"No, no, no, no." She refused to believe the outcome. Unable to stand in her panic, she continued her desperate crawl forward, knees bleeding.

As she touched Finch's boot, Titus tried to lift her away, but she wrestled out of his hold, collapsing over her friend's body.

"Don't touch me!"

"You don't want to see him. Not like this."

Despite his protests, Titus didn't try to pull her away again, standing to the side in defeat as Hermione cradled Finch's head in her hands, brushing the wiry strings of dirty blond hair from his face.

“Wake up,” she begged. “Please. What will Dean—” His body was both limp and impossibly heavy, unresponsive to her summons, eyes empty of any spark.

She bent over his chest, trying futilely to listen to his heartbeat. A loud noise hurt her head with its intensity, and it took a second to realise that the sound was her own scream.

Finch was dead— from the curse she’d taught him in the safety of the treehouse.

She’d done this.

The weaving cracks in her mind shattered with one blow. The ancient grief pulled her under, drowned her. Things she’d buried long ago dug up through the soil of her soul.

Time became nothing as she rocked Finch’s body, until Titus gently pulled her hands away. “He’s gone, love. It might be better that it was by his own hand. The punishment for killing a master would’ve been— it would have broken your heart even more.”

“It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

“It’s not.”

He didn’t understand. If she hadn’t wanted magic so badly, if she hadn’t disobeyed, none of this would have happened.

She fought Titus when he eventually tugged her away. Her fingers found purchase on his cheeks, scratching like an animal, raising welts along his skin, trying to get back to Finch in a mindless panic, but he only guided her arms firmly around his shoulders, lifting her legs.

“We have to go home,” he whispered.

“Don’t leave him alone!”

”His body will be preserved and kept safe until burial. I promise, but we need to get you home.”

“Finch!” she screamed. But Titus ignored her pleas, walking away into the dark streets, holding her tighter as she struggled.

His heavy cloak smelled of cinnamon, warm around her shoulders as he wrapped her up, as if to protect her from the elements, just as he’d done as he’d carried her away from her father’s body.

Hermione wanted to become numb, wanted the sudden emptiness of detachment, but this time, she found it impossible.

“I need Draco,” she pleaded.

His shoulders tensed under her grasp, but he kept walking.

“You have me— you’ll always have me.”



The grief was too much to bear. Both the realisation that she'd never get to see her friend again, and the guilt that it might have been her fault for teaching him the unforgivable in the first place, severed her spirit in half. A foreign sensation began to slide down her cheeks, dripping off her chin. Ugly sobs tore from her mouth.

"He's gone," she whispered.

For the first time since before her father died, Hermione pressed her face into Titus' shoulder and began to cry.

---

Finch was buried behind the treehouse on a rare sunny morning in the fall. The shade of the tree covered the grave in the afternoon and wildflowers would grow in clumps during the spring. There was nowhere else suitable to bury him, and Hermione selfishly had wanted his grave close by, so she could visit whenever she wanted.

The sunshine hurt her eyes— a setting incongruous with the tempestuous storm inside her. The sky should be dark, rain lashing against the earth, a punishment just for her.

Dean trembled next to her in formal wear, staring at the closed casket, its black lacquer gleaming in the sun. Her guilt had made her unable to face him since he arrived. Pansy hovered behind Dean with Mr. Parkinson beside her, looking sombre. Katie stood on the opposite side, leaning against Marcus, a handkerchief pressed to her nose.

Hermione wished to erase the sight of Finch's limp body and blank eyes from her memory. Instead, she tried to concentrate on all of the good things: the way he would set clever traps for insects, find images in clouds, and befriend the gnomes. At lunchtime, he used to go on long rants about something interesting he'd read, while the rest of them were bored out of their minds hearing about the migration patterns of the nearly extinct golden snidgets.

What she would give to go back and listen again to his voice with rapt attention. She debated whether she could steal a time turner from the ministry just to experience it again.

Hermione had struggled to dress for the day, refusing to eat or wash her hair, having laid in bed for days. Like she suspected, once the tears began to flow, they didn't stop. A lifetime of pain bubbled up inside her heart alongside her friend's death. Her nights were filled with wrenching sobs, dreaming of Finch's death, over and over, never being able to save him. Her days were spent trying and failing to detach from her reality.

Her broken state was caused by more than Finch's death, she realised. It was everything she'd lost. Everything she'd endured. The sum of the horrors she'd experienced had finally drained her spirit, leaving only a husk of her former self.

When Titus levitated the casket and lowered it into the hole, nestling it against the damp soil below, Hermione's knees almost buckled.

"Wait," she cried when the soil began to trickle inside, threatening to smother her friend forever. She pulled out a terrarium she'd taken from the treehouse the day before, one with a long dead butterfly. "Bury him with this. Something he loved."

Titus studied her as he had for days, treating her like spun glass. He took the terrarium from her, along with a bracelet made of string from Dean, and lowered both inside. As the soil began to patter against the casket, Dean collapsed, covering his face with his hands, groaning in pain, and then dug his fingers into the soil as if to bring Finch back out. Pansy leaned down beside him with her bottom lip quivering, gently placing a hand on his back, for once without her omnipresent sneer.

A part of Hermione wanted to be obliviated, but she couldn't imagine a life where she'd never met Finch, and she couldn't imagine a life now where he didn't exist. If she could travel back in time, she would have loved Finch just the same, if not more, because now she knew how little time they had left.

If grief was the payment for love, she'd empty her pockets of her change and step voluntarily into eternal debt for just the sliver of a moment beside him again.

---

Life lost all colour.

Hermione ceased her attempts at escape, trudging through the new grey landscape. On the rare days that she emerged from her room, she'd taken to wandering the manor like a spectre, especially when she knew Titus would be gone. She'd stop by the coven's old haunts, lingering in the music room. Sitting at the piano, she'd stroke the ivory keys, cleaning streaks of dust away with her tears. And then she'd attempt a simple song that Julie forced them to learn long ago, butchering it as she always had.

Short excursions like that were all she could manage on her own. She found it difficult to do anything for survival, including eating. Her stomach revolted at the thought of taking a single bite, and each time she put food into her mouth, it went down like acid and boiled in her stomach, no matter the type of food Bitty or Eddy presented.

It didn't take long until Titus forced her to dinner, sitting her in front of a platter of food— all of her favourites.

Titus slumped across from her, steepling his fingers, brows creased with worry. "You can't continue this way. You have to eat."

He waited, but she didn't do anything.

"I'm not going to let you starve to death. You aren't leaving this table without consuming a few bites. I'll give you ten minutes, and then we'll do this another way that you probably won't like."

Hermione watched the clock move, timing by the ticks of the second hand, until she heard Titus give a big sigh.

"Imperio."

After a simple order, she placed the food in her mouth and chewed repetitively. The meal gave her no pleasure, paining her empty stomach. When she finished, Titus released the curse, leaning back in his chair, running his hand over his face to swipe away his frustration.

“Tell me what I can do to help you.”

“I don't want anything from you.” She ignored the jolt of pain in his face as she retreated to her room.

---

A few days later, she lingered at the edge of the south pond, letting her fingers brush the silky water, turning her fingers red with its icy temperatures.

“There's no such thing as water beasts,” an invisible Finch said beside her. She remembered them sitting in this spot years ago on a summer day, arguing about the contents of the deep in the pond.

“Then what are you trying to find?” Dean had asked as Finch trudged into the water on a mission with only a bubblehead charm and a net.

“Grindylows, of course.”

The memory called Hermione forward. She slipped off her shoes, sinking her toes into the cold mud. Water lapped at her ankles and then went up to her waist. She controlled her shivers, enjoying the discomfort of the temperature. As she remembered the peace under the water at Malfoy manor, she found the call of the deep impossible to resist.

She trudged forward, her white dress billowing around her body, until the water covered her head, murkier than usual from a recent rainstorm. The silt obstructed most of her view.

The pressure weighed down her bones as she struggled to swim lower, until her feet rested against the slimy bottom. With the heavy darkness came a silence that drowned out all of the old voices inside her mind. Like before, a peace washed over her even as her lungs burned. The lack of oxygen began to hurt, but she refused to resurface, clinging to the moment of relief. She wished to stay in the shadowy depths forever, side by side with the mythical water beasts.

She ignored all of her screaming instincts, and the bracelet on her wrist glowed a bright red—a warning of mortal peril.

Just as she welcomed the blissful darkness, a person sliced through the water, shattering her solitude by roughly grabbing her arm and forcing her up. Titus didn't give her any avenue to fight, and she didn't have the energy to resist as he swam. When they broke the surface, she gasped in a breath on instinct. Without allowing her a moment to orient herself, he paddled until he could stand, and then tossed her to the slimy edge of the pond. They both heaved in panting breaths when he loomed over her with a furious glare. She tried to move away, but he tugged her back under him.

“What were you doing?” he shouted, lips blue with the cold.

Hermione retched up some water she'd swallowed. "I just wanted to find a Grindyflow."

"What the fuck, Sprite. You could have killed your—"

He stopped abruptly and glanced at the water, eyes widening with his own conclusion.

But he was wrong. He had to be wrong. She didn't want to die. She'd just wanted peace. An absence of sound. The squeeze of pain in her lungs.

Titus cursed, dripping dirty water on her as he rested his forehead against hers. His dark clothes slicked tight to his skin, as he'd dived into the pond in his full auror outfit, including his thick armour and his dragonhide boots.

"You were at work?" Hermione didn't know why she asked the question.

He brushed off the curls that had been plastered to her face. "I was on an assignment."

Her bracelet had warned him that she'd been in mortal peril, and he'd apparated straight to her.

"Don't fucking scare me like that again." He blinked a few times, as if trying to shove away terrible thoughts. "You're slipping away, and I don't know what to do— just tell me what to do."

There were many things he could do, but he wouldn't listen to any of them.

When she didn't answer, he bundled her up against his chest and brought her to his room, using cleaning and drying charms. The sudden spike of adrenaline in her body had depleted, leaving her shivering and empty, and she curled up on the far edge of his bed without getting under the covers.

Later in the night, he tugged her close, warming her chilled skin, curving his heavy body against hers.

"Don't give up on me," he whispered to the dark, kissing her forehead, holding her tight to his chest. "You're all I have left."

---

She slept and slept and slept.

Titus took off work for several days to watch her, waiting in a chair beside the bed with a book clutched in his hands, wearing reading glasses. Sometimes, he also brought his paperwork in the room, and she dozed to the scratch of quill on parchment. He forced her out of bed twice a day to eat with an imperio and seemed to possess endless patience with her listless state, though as the days went on, she sensed his desperation.

One morning, she woke up to Titus shifting out of bed. The room was sharply cool, and she snuggled under the warmth of blankets, hovering in the space between awake and dreams—the comfortable spot where she briefly forgot everything.

Titus didn't attempt to hide anything as he dressed, but she always glanced away, only viewing an outline of an intimidating physique, honed like a weapon from years of rigorous training.

When he shoved a casual black shirt over his head, pulling it down to cover the span of his back, he turned back to view her.

"You have no choice but to get up and participate in life today. You can't rot in here forever."

Hermione thought she could. She imagined staying in place so long that her bones fossilised. "Are you going to imperio me to do that? Because I'd rather rot."

"We have guests."

Hermione groaned, rolled over, and covered her head with the blanket, only for it to be tugged off by an angry Titus.

"Enough," he snapped, finally losing his patience. "I think you'd like to meet them."

"I doubt that. All your friends are degenerates."

He rolled his eyes and threw the blanket on the floor, leaving her to shiver.

"You might be right, but Severus will be arriving for dinner later today, and he's bringing his muggleborn and adopted children."

Lily Potter.

A single spark of curiosity jolted through her. It wasn't much, but it was enough to get her out of bed. When Bitty came to help Hermione bathe, she entered the tub on her own.

---

The first thing she noticed about Lily Potter when she stepped through the floo was that she wasn't meek. When Snape attempted to take her cloak, she shoved his hand away. "I can do this myself."

"Of course," Snape said in an even drawl. Hermione wondered if the inflection ever changed, except perhaps with disdain.

After brief introductions, Lily grabbed Hermione's hand and shook hard. Kind green eyes, bright red hair, soft smile lines and tiny wrinkles around her eyes from years of laughter—she seemed like an average mum. More normal than the image she'd built in her mind.

A teenage girl hid behind her mother. Glasses perched on her nose, looking like a startling copy of Harry, except with blue eyes and dark auburn hair. She stared at Hermione in open fascination before dropping her gaze, a flush staining her cheeks. The youngest boy, probably only eight at the most, looked identical to his mum—red hair, green eyes, except, unlike his siblings, he didn't need vision correction. He bounced on his toes, already bored, and tugged on the collar of his shirt.

"We have a treehouse," Hermione told the boy. "Would you like to see it?"

Titus froze, studying her carefully. She realised in the ensuing silence that what she said had come out of nowhere, since they'd been discussing something else.

"That's a great idea," Titus said slowly as if one wrong word would cause her to bolt. "How about you go show Remus the statues in the mazes too. Gemma might like to go as well."

"No, thank you." Gemma pressed to her mum's side.

"She's shy when she first meets people," her mum explained.

"It's okay," Hermione assured her.

The boy didn't need to be asked twice. With a whoop of excitement to be getting out of a formal setting, Remus skipped along behind her as she walked out of the manor for the first time in weeks.

---

Hermione liked children because they existed without pretence. She didn't need to smile or think of what to say to make conversation. Once Remus started to talk, he didn't stop.

In the middle of his story about an exploding potion, Hermione wondered if the boy knew the man who killed his father was hosting the dinner. Did he even remember the death? She didn't know if she was jealous of his innocence or if she pitied his future understanding.

At least, he loved the treehouse. But what child wouldn't? He squealed when the bucket brought him up.

"I wish we had something like this. Sevv's place is a little dingy no matter how much it's cleaned. My old home was so much better. And my brother—" He wandered over to the terrariums. "You need new bugs."

"How about you catch some for me?"

They spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the gardens. In the end, he caught a ladybird, and she told him he could keep the terrarium. He seemed excited about it, and she watched him wistfully, wishing she could experience such easy joy again.

Bitty arrived before they could catch anything else, and Hermione's stomach squeezed in trepidation. If she could, she'd spend the rest of the day outside with Remus. Socialising seemed too difficult a task. But eventually, she faced the inevitable, attempting occlumency on her walk back to the manor, building shallow shelves without titles.

---

Hermione stabbed a carrot and brought it to her lips, letting her tongue rest on the tip, and Titus' stare burned into her. At the moment, he sat next to her, engaging in most of the conversation. Snape was more upbeat than usual, yet still answered in a continuous dreary tone.

Unable to finish a bite, she set her fork down with the carrot impaled on the tines. Titus grabbed her knee and squeezed under the table, leaning close to her. "Don't be rude."

He'd created this dinner so that peer pressure might force her to eat again, but she remained too distracted by watching Snape and Lily interact. She'd expected raw hatred. Instead, Harry's mum seemed... congenial, and it turned her stomach.

"You're wrong about your theory." Lily dabbed her napkin to her lip, completely unafraid of the way her master turned to her with a disgusted sneer.

"Care to elaborate?"

"I'm sorry, Severus," Titus chimed in. "But I side with Lily on this."

"Mum's always right." Gemma flushed and bowed her head when all the eyes turned to her.

Snape's sneer deepened and then he sighed. "That's true. Regrettably, I'm surrounded by women who outthink me."

Little Remus wiggled in his seat beside Snape, but he managed to behave enough to eat. Halfway through dinner, the boy asked his mother if he could go back outside and play.

"I suppose," she said. "Just stay out of the mud and the water. And don't go too far."

"I'll have Bitty follow him." Titus watched Remus sprint out of the doors, and then he gave a kind smile to Gemma. "I've been told that you had top marks on your OWLs. A true Ravenclaw."

"She's third in her class," Snape said. "A model pupil, much like her mother." Compliments seemed rare from him.

Gemma squirmed under the attention, and Hermione couldn't help but remember the night of the ritual. Dolohov had wanted to start the girl's Trials early, hoping she might be the key to the curse. Whatever they were doing wasn't working, and Hermione didn't think it would work when they sacrificed Gemma's innocence to it either. Knowing a secret so foul made her violently ill.

Would Snape watch? Did Lily know what might happen to her sweet daughter?

Hermione wondered what it must be like to have to share a bed with the man who helped murder her husband. Did Lily fight? Refuse to eat? Did she crawl into a pond for the silence?

From the looks of it, it seemed like Lily was doing nothing.

"Hermione is as studious as a Ravenclaw too." Titus placed his arm around her chair and brushed his fingers on her shoulder. "Maybe you could bring Gemma by sometime again during Christmas break, so that they can get to know each other."

Was this what Titus' goal was? To give her new companions? Gemma was younger and not a muggleborn, brought to dinner on a special outing from Hogwarts with her guardian. What would they have in common?

Nothing about this dinner made her feel better. In fact, she felt like if she stayed one more second, she might say things that would get her in trouble.

"I can't do this." The chair legs screeched under Hermione as she stood and shoved off Titus' heavy arm.

"Sit back down." The demand came out like a plea, but she ignored it, sprinting out of the room.

---

Hermione curled up on her bed, suppressing her sobs. Now that she'd relearned how to cry, it was hard to stop, and it wasn't cathartic. The damnable liquid leaked out of her eyes like acid rain, scorching her skin.

A soft knock on the door interrupted her. Lily peeked into the room before walking inside and shutting the door behind her.

"I don't want to talk." Especially not with her. She just wanted to disappear.

"I understand," Lily whispered. "I remember. Right now everything hurts so much. It feels like you can't breathe. And you just want it all to stop."

She supposed Lily would understand, out of anyone.

"Will it ever stop?" Hermione already knew the answer, but wanted it confirmed.

"Unfortunately, no."

Hermione took a deep breath, appreciating the honesty. Being around Titus all the time proved to be exhausting, his worry overbearing, especially when he'd caused most of it. He just wanted her back to her old self, but she'd never be her old self again.

Hermione lifted her head and then gasped, finding Lily pointing a wand straight at her.

She should be nervous under Lily's threatening stance, but she focused on the wand with jealousy. "Snape lets you do magic?"

"I dared him to take my wand from me... and he didn't."

Hermione lifted her wrists, showing the obsidian. "As you can see, Titus gives me no such leniency."

Lily rested elegantly on the edge of her reading chair, studying the room. "Such fine things. Everything is gilded or covered with silk and pearls."

"I'd prefer it all to burn."



"I'm sure your apathy irritates your master. Based on what Severus has told me, he's desperate to spoil you."

She liked how she called Titus her master. It stripped away the illusions.

"Why are you here?"

"Nott sent me to talk to you. We're much alike, you see. Both stolen from someone we love and forced to accept someone new. Your master saw the similarities." Lily picked up a book from her shelf and riffled through the worn pages before setting it back down. In this light, she seemed younger. "Nott wants me to assure you that one day soon you'll find comfort in your new life like I have. That if you just let yourself forgive, happiness will come after. That it's all a choice, in the end."

"And have you found comfort in your new life?" Hermione snapped, bitterness leaking out with each word.

"They think I have, and that's all that matters." A spark lit up behind Lily's eyes, something dangerous. She recognized the hidden rage. "Your pain might lessen, Hermione, but only in the way a wound might scab over an infection. The only comfort you'll ever find will be a tolerable level of acceptance. Perhaps they're right, and it's a choice to forgive, though I haven't personally learned how. The horrid truth they *don't* want me to tell you is that the Butcher will eventually require you to swallow your pain— sooner rather than later. He'd rather you pretend to be happy, so he can cease feeling so guilty."

Hermione revelled in the raw candour, laid out so clearly, but found it hard to breathe. Though she already suspected it to be this way, the life Lily presented was everything she feared— purposeless and stripped of anything she truly desired. Titus would mine every precious gem from her soul, if she wasn't careful.

Lily shed her smile, letting her true emotions show through, and then she raised her wand again.

"Answer me truthfully." There was no tremble in Lily's wand hand, but Hermione didn't have the capacity to be afraid. "Did you betray the Order?"

Hermione glanced out the window. "I never mastered Occlumency, no matter how much I tried. Titus cracked through my defences easily. I tried to fight. But— you can curse me, if you want. I deserve for you to hurt me. All of the deaths are my fault. I won't tell or get out of the way. It might actually make me feel better."

"The raid of the base was a blow to our cause, the loss of life horrific." Lily hesitated and dropped her wand, expression softening. "But Sirius is an idiot for believing you volunteered the information. He's always jumped to conclusions too quickly, believing you to be still brainwashed. But I knew you were only a trapt thing, just like me."

That information both stung and confused her. "You're in contact with the Order?"

“As you say, your Occlumency needs a little work.” Lily placed her index finger against her lips, confirming her question while also showing she wouldn’t say anything more.

Something hot rose in Hermione, almost like hope, but it burned like fire.

Lily tucked her wand back into her pocket. “I wouldn’t have hurt you, regardless. I just wanted to see how you would react under pressure. You see— my oldest son is reckless, foolish, and angry right now and would’ve been killed right away if you hadn’t imperioed him. I owe you a life debt for saving him.”

Hermione didn’t question how Lily knew the details. She’d worried about Harry since the incident, hoping he’d gotten away. The relief in knowing she’d managed to save him caused her to cry again.

Lily walked over to the bed and sat on the edge, pulling her into a comforting hug. She melted into the embrace, missing Tabitha, missing the mother she never got to know.

She felt the need to warn her about Gemma. “Dolohov plans to force your daughter—”

“I know what he plans,” Lily whispered in a tight voice, showing she didn’t want to discuss the topic. She squeezed her shoulder. “Have courage. It’s difficult to endure right now, but if you ever want to get away, I feel I must warn you not to get pregnant. Once a child is involved, the risks are greater, and it becomes infinitely harder to escape.” From the inflection in her voice, Lily spoke of herself. How she was manipulated by the safety and proximity of her children. “Titus is counting on the sacrifices you’ll make, Hermione, which is why he wants you pregnant right away, so that you’ll be easy to control.”

Hermione held onto her tighter, stealing the comfort. “He’s only promised me six months.”

Lily kissed her forehead as a mother would. She dipped her head lower, placing her lips to her ear. “I can help you get back to the Order before that time.”

Hermione froze at the promise. “How?”

“You have to prove your loyalty first. Kingsley and Sirius have no choice but to make sure you’re not a threat. They need to know you won’t return to Titus. When the time is right, we’ll send a spy to give you a task. However, I have a mission for you today— if you want it.”

Hermione pulled away, swiping away her tears.

“I’ll do *anything*.”

Lily dug back into her pocket, coming out with a small device shaped like a tiny ear. “Do you recognize this?”

She did. The Weasley twins invented it. Though this looked far more advanced than the prototypes Theo showed her, even more complicated than the listening device he’d used to help Draco spy on them during the trials. According to Theo, he’d retrieved the invention from the manor long ago, and she hadn’t seen anything like it since.

“You want to spy on Titus?”

“Snape told me he’s having a private conversation with him tonight after I go home. You know the Butcher better than anyone. Where would that take place?”

“His study,” Hermione answered automatically.

“Do you have access?”

More than access. An invitation. A reading chair with books and a soft light above. Titus would like nothing more than if she walked inside and sat with him while he worked again. The only restriction placed against her in the room was the desk drawers.

“I do.”

“Then you’re the *only* person in the world that can do this.”

“And all I have to do is place it somewhere?”

She shook her head. “The charms on this version are more stable and practically invisible once attached. However, the downside is that the charms for invisibility limit the range compared to earlier models. The connected ear will have to stay in the manor— with you. Any information you learn will need to be relayed to our undercover spy.”

“How will I know who it is?”

“They’ll make themselves known.”

Hermione hesitated, thinking through the potential consequences and rewards. She didn’t have to consider for long and grasped the ear.

“I’ll do it.”

“The Butcher was right,” Lily said, a pleased smile growing on her face. “We’re much alike.”

---

Hermione made sure to avoid the portraits while she slipped along the corridors. They’d snitch on her to Titus, and then she’d lose the chance to prove herself to the Order.

Hermione entered the study without incident. Since her doppelgänger, she’d never stepped foot into the room. Her old reading chair was still in the same spot with a low light hovering above— the only light on, as if enticing her to come and stay.

She ignored the implications, travelling to the desk. Making sure no portraits or elves could see, she pressed the tiny ear under the heavy wooden edge, right above the image of a dragon flying into shape-shifting clouds. Like Lily promised, it vanished on contact.

Her task felt far too easy for its importance, but she didn’t dither or second guess herself, and raced back to her room.

---

That night Hermione stared at the ceiling on her bed, the connecting device fitted snugly in her ear.

She heard the familiar shuffle of Titus' dragon hide boots into his study first, followed by steps more careful and quieter. She sat up straight with bated breath, hoping he didn't discover the Weasley Twins' invention. There wouldn't be an easy answer for its placement.

"An impressive desk," Snape said. A creak of chairs followed as they both sat down.

"An heirloom. Do you want a drink?"

"I might as well."

Titus snapped his fingers, and Bitty's familiar pop of apparition filled her ear. He uncapped the whisky and poured it into two glasses.

"I'd like to thank you for coming for dinner," Titus began. "Hermione's been... struggling with the transition and the death of her friend. Lily's been an excellent example of a witch handling her circumstances with grace. I thought seeing her might help."

Snape snorted in derision. "We've had our troubles too."

"Of course," Titus said. "But she's settled well."

"Perhaps," Snape answered.

"Still having trouble?"

"In a few ways. Dolohov's pressuring me again to start the girl's Trial. Lily knows about it, and is *not* very happy, of course."

"He's getting desperate. The sailors have said that the boundary's wobbling. Sunk a few boats. We might lose the coast if—"

"She's a child," Snape bit back.

"She is," Titus agreed. "I don't agree with his plans. If you need someone to argue your case, I will. Avery needs to step aside as the lead intelligence on the curse. He'd be more suited toward the auror department, because we need all the help we can get. On top of everything, the cult in the east is growing stronger. Someone called Antioch. They treat him like the new messiah."

"I've heard. Do you think the recent deaths of Marchbanks and Ogden are connected?"

Hermione straightened, recognizing the names. They were both Prominent Wizengamot members. She could vaguely remember their faces staring down at her in purple robes, voting against Draco keeping her.

"No," Titus' voice went lower. "I think those are the work of Draco Malfoy."

Hermione felt electrocuted. The image of Rodolphus' headless corpse projected in her mind along with the inferi of Rabastan lumbering around Trafalgar square.

Had Draco killed others?

"I thought they cleared him of suspicion?"

"They have, but I don't believe it. All of the deaths fit the same pattern, and the handwriting matches a sample of his. Rumours have begun about a dark wizard within our ranks. People are getting worried, and the Wizengamot are on edge."

Snape made a clicking noise with his tongue. "I think your bias is getting in the way of your job this time. Draco has a solid alibi. Are you willing to risk war with Lucius with your only evidence being a possible match in handwriting? If I could pick a suspect, it would be Bellatrix."

Titus' sudden silence showed he thought through the information. "I suspect her too. When Julie left, Bellatrix's grip on sanity lessened. It did seem convenient that it was Rodolphus without a head, but that could be a false flag." He sighed. "Perhaps you're right. I hate the little fuck, but the severity of the dark magic and his alibi don't lend credence to my theory, though I still don't trust him."

"You shouldn't trust him," Snape agreed. "Even before his mother's death, he was a spoiled child, insisting on getting what he wanted. And after her death, he turned into a cruel one. Like his aunt, he showed signs of being mentally unwell long ago, ever since the Beltane massacres. I've been told that when they found the boy alive in the carnage, he was holding his mother's severed hand. The Blacks have a history of madness, and this latest development might have tipped him over the edge. Since the beginning, he's focused his attention on your ward to an unhealthy degree that I've tried to dissuade long ago. I wouldn't put it past him to do something drastic to get her back, and Lucius can't control him—"

"Could you control him? You're his godfather. One of the only wizards I've heard that he respects."

"I'll try." The ear gave a crackle of static as one of the men shifted in their seats. "But only in exchange for keeping Dolohov's interest off the girl."

"You seem to care for her."

"Should I not? I've taken on the role of her father."

"I just didn't think you had it in you."

"I love her mother." Snape sounded insulted. "Always have. We grew up together. I don't wish to see her child subjected to such barbaric practices."

More liquid was poured into a glass. "I share your revulsion. If I could have saved Hermione from it, I would've. But Dolohov will insist on the Trials eventually."

"Not when she's only sixteen," Snape's voice was cold. "And not when she's eighteen either. In fact, I might refuse completely. While I understand she must attempt to reproduce and possibly undergo the ritual, she'll at the very least be paired with a suitable partner of her *choice*, preferably close to her age, sans a Trial."

"That's a dangerous statement. Dolohov might interpret that as treason."

"Let him interpret it as he wishes. I won't be the only father who objects. What happens when the halfblood daughters of our guard start getting thrown into the mix? Tell me, what are you going to do if you have a girl? Will you feed her to wolves in the hopes she won't get mauled?"

The only sound was the clink of a glass as it was set on the desk. "I'll think of a way to bring the subject up to him."

"That's all I ask." There was a pregnant pause. "Will you be at the dinner?"

"Not this time. Hermione's not ready for social events, and there's an Order base in Bristol I've been watching. Those tunnels keep them well-hidden. My aurors are waiting for them to fuck up. I can't take my eyes off it for too long."

"Of course." The legs of a chair made a noise as she thought Snape might be standing. "If you need any of my potions, just let me know."

Hermione absorbed the news as they stated their goodbyes, exiting the room.

Bristol was the base she'd stayed at during her time with the Order, filled with younger Order members. It didn't seem like Titus was making a move right away. Probably just gaining intelligence. He liked to wait like a spider, ensuring victory before the attack.

She needed to get the information to the Order that Titus was on their tail before that happened,

Like Lily suggested, she might be the only person in the world with the power to do that.

---

The next morning, a knock woke her up. Hermione rubbed her eyes, trying to figure out why she woke in Titus' bed when she could have sworn she'd fallen asleep in her old bedroom after hiding the ear under the floorboards— so tiny it almost disappeared where she dropped it.

She peeled Titus' heavy arm from her waist, poking him in the side. "Someone is here."

He groaned as she untangled their limbs, trying to put as much distance between them as possible.

"You may pretend to hate me in the morning." Titus gave a playful tug to a curl as she escaped, and he stood up. "But your unconscious mind seeks me out every night."

Her brain was too sleepy and confused to think of a suitable scathing reply.

When Titus opened the bedroom door, she wasn't surprised to see Theo loitering outside. Who else could get past the wards? He must have been granted access to the manor again.

Theo had his wand out, pressed under Titus' chin before either of them could speak. "I thought you said you hadn't forced her to your bed, you arse."

"It's innocent," Titus sneered. "Her friend died. You know she still suffers from nightmares and doesn't sleep well without people. It's a special circumstance."

Theo lowered his wand reluctantly, jaw clenched. "Are you going to stop me like last time?"

Titus heaved a heavy sigh and crossed his arms. "I was the one who owed you, correct? A long time ago, I might add."

"We were on a special assignment in the Alps to visit a famed healer. You knew that. I wasn't allowed to contact anyone. I came as soon as I could."

"Well, I'm glad you finally made it home, because she needs you too."

The brothers glared at each other, neither budging until Titus gave in and stepped out of the way, allowing Theo to enter past his bulky frame.

"I'll leave you two alone," Titus said from the doorframe. "But I expect the both of you to be at breakfast in an hour. As I explained in the letter, if I see improvement in your moods, I'll grant you permission to take Hermione to Diagon Alley, along with three of my best aurors."

Hermione waited until Titus shut the door to sit up. "Diagon Alley?"

"It's a bribe, but it's a good one," Theo admitted. Seeing her brother caused her heart to ache again, always feeling safe in his presence. "Do you want to go back to sleep before breakfast?"

She didn't even have to give a nod before he crawled into the space beside her.

They held hands like they used to do as children, fingers intertwined.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. About Finch... and about Draco."

"I know you are."

---

For the first time in her life, Hermione took no joy in walking around Diagon Alley. The fog rolled into the streets, making a dreary day. The mist clung to her curls in droplets as they ate ice cream, bought books, and managed a short excursion into the quidditch shop.

Titus had allowed her to get out of the manor, hoping to raise her spirits, but she needed more than the cobbled streets. Ollivander's was boarded up for the time being, reminding her of her failures, and she couldn't even look at Malfoy's Apothecary and Medicinals, finding the memories too painful.

The hope from Lily's visit was hard to keep lit. She'd gone to bed elated at the thought of helping the Order and escaping, but with the morning light, she feared she'd just hurt more people in the process. An insidious voice inside her head debated on giving up the dream entirely. Perhaps she *should* settle into her new life, try and learn to love Titus again the way he wanted. Find happiness in home and children.

Even the thought made her want to curl into bed again and sleep.

“Are we going back to the manor after this?” she asked while exiting Gambol and Japes. Theo looked askance at her as he had all morning, giving the same worried stares as Titus. Her mood had darkened through the day, realising the things that used to bring her joy had only been circumstantial.

“I thought we could go to Madam Malkins,” he said carefully.

“I don’t really want a new dress.”

“I’ve heard there’s a new fabric they discovered, using silk from the ice spiders in the Himalayas.”

“Really, I don’t—” Hermione's heart thumped hard, aching under her ribs. She understood Theo’s true meaning, but she added a warning. “Titus might get angry that you brought me to Malkins when he likes to only order from France.”

His eyes looked sad. “I think you need a new dress. Even if you never wear it again.”

---

Hermione left the aurors and Theo in the lobby of Malkins, while the attendant brought her back to a dressing room— a private one far in the back.

“Wait right here. Someone should be coming along shortly to help you.” The woman’s hand had been shaking the whole time, exposing her nerves. Hermione wondered how much gold she’d been given for the danger to be worth it.

Standing on the circular dais in front of the large mirror hovering in the corner, Hermione clenched the fabric of her dress in her hands, growing more frantic the longer it took.

When the curtains finally swished to the side, she froze.

Draco looked ill. Not even heavy Occlumency could hide the distress. The physical signs showed up in skin paler than normal, dark shadows under his eyes, unkempt hair.

“Tell me you’re real.”

“I’d rather show you.” He walked over and gently touched her cheek. She pressed further into the feeling. “Didn’t I promise I’d always come for you?”

It was too much. An instant relief. A rainbow at the end of a storm. The morning after a fever breaks.



She would have crumpled, but Draco caught her limp body, pulling her into a tight hold. She sobbed as he held the back of her head steady, face pressed into his chest, both of them sinking to their knees. One cry turned into another, and she broke in his arms. He silenced the room as she wept, digging her nails into his shirt to anchor herself.

"I'm here, Granger." He tilted her face up, giving a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Be honest with me... has Nott hurt you?"

"No. Not like that."

He groaned in relief. "I know about Fin—"

"I don't want to talk about him. Not right now."

Draco searched her expression and gave a short nod. "I tried to send Hopper, but Nott returned it by owl."

Hermione almost asked why he would do that, but it made sense. Titus would rather she turn to him for her night terrors instead of a stuffed animal. Besides that, any kind gestures from his rival would be denied outright.

There were so many things she wanted to talk to Draco about, but she had to warn him first.

"Your father—"

"I shouldn't have ever trusted him. I won't make the same mistake again."

"He plans to enter you into another Trial."

Draco gave a sneer she hadn't seen in a long time, full of disdain. "He can't make me do anything. And even if I did participate, it would only be to make sure that I lost. My father isn't going to risk wasting a token right now."

Another worry unwound from her chest. Hermione straightened, allowing her tears to dry as she studied Draco, memorising all of the things she took for granted. "Was it you?"

She didn't have to elaborate.

Draco's grin turned sharp. "Don't be scared."

"Of what?"

"Of my appearance."

She almost asked him to clarify, but the muscles in his face slackened, the familiar transformation of taking off his occlumenecy.

Steel grey turned to blood red.

Hermione gasped in horror, touching his cheek. "Bloody hell, what did you do?"

“Dark soul magic.”

Her suspicions were true— he’d killed the Lestranges.

But the creation of inferi had extracted a heavy price. The proof of his deeds stared back at her with crimson irises.

“This is permanent.” Her stomach turned at the thought of the pain he must have endured. “You mutilated your soul.” Dark magic had killed many foolish wizards. It took a lot of power, training, and inner strength to survive the impact.

“I didn’t do it alone.”

“Who helped you?”

He reached out and touched her temples gently. “Let me in, and I’ll show you.”

She allowed eye contact, and when he slipped into her mind, she welcomed the familiar intrusion. He paused at her shattered shelves, having only rebuilt a few.

“I’ll make him regret this too,” he whispered before a brilliant scene erupted in her mind.

Draco stood in the drawing room of what she thought might be the townhome in London, filled with dusty and outdated furniture. Both the Lestrangle brothers were propped in the corner, bound by an incarcerous. Rabastan looked unconscious, but Rodolphus glared at Draco. He was talking to him, alternating between bribery and threats. Draco ignored it all, tapping his wand against his hand, and holding a delicate ring inlaid with an opal.

“It was my mother’s,” Draco whispered into her ear. “All of her sisters had one. They used them to contact each other by pressing it three times.”

Hermione returned to the memory, hearing Rodolphus once again bribing Draco.

“I’ll give you my spot in the VIP room of the Red Ruby. I think a young boy like you would enjoy it. You’ve only had one cunt. The others are just as—”

“Shut the fuck up before I rip out your tongue.” Draco didn’t even look at him, standing inside a circle made with salt and what she thought might be blood.

“You little brat. You’ll be executed for—”

“Do you ever shut up? Silencio.”

Hermione didn’t need to wait long to see what would happen next. Footsteps scaled the staircase, followed by an odd cackle that raised the hair along the back of her neck.

A wild mass of dark curls entered first.

“Hello nephew,” Bellatrix Lestrangle cooed. Her eyes snapped to the men tied up, and another loud cackle slicked down her spine. She twirled a wand in her hand as if it was a toy. “You’ve

brought me some lovely gifts.”

Draco pointed his wand at his aunt. “For a price.”

In the corner, Rodolphus' eyes widened, and he tried to wriggle away but had nowhere to go.

“So much like your father.” Bellatrix tutted, walking in with an odd gait. “Always a transaction. What do you want?”

“The Black grimoire. I know you stole it back. There are old family spells I need.”

Bellatrix ran her tongue along chapped lips. “And what would a little boy like you do with such dark, *evil* spells.”

“Make an inferi.”

Bellatrix’s eyebrows jumped to a comical height, every movement exaggerated. “Perhaps you're a true Black after all.”

“Do we have a deal or not? Your cooperation in exchange for the man who raped your daughter.”

Bellatrix must have known or suspected her husband’s crime, because she tilted her head down at the words, eyes darkening to the colour of onyx. Her curls defied gravity, lifting with a crackle of volatile magic.

She dug into her robe, extracting and unshrinking a heavy old book. Even through the memory, Hermione sensed the blood magic wards leaking from the spine.

“I’ve been meaning to spend some quality family time with you, nephew.” She grinned, exposing sharp canines. “Inferi spells require the dead of night, which gives us *hours* to have fun before then. Whatever shall we do to fill our time?”

She stalked forward, shoving the book into Draco’s hands. In response, he stripped away the silencio on Rodolphus.

“They lied,” Rodolphus begged, shaking his head, eyes wide with terror. “You know me. Listen to reason, Bella. She came onto me. Begged me to—”

“Crucio!”

Screams filled the room as she cursed him over and over and over, only stopping to prolong other physical tortures, slicing away a few body parts, including the appendage that had hurt her daughter the most, going slowly to prolong his pain.

Draco pulled out of her mind before she could see the rest of the gruesome scene, bringing her back to the dressing room of Madam Malkins.

“Bellatrix helped you,” Hermione said in shock.

“Only with the deaths and the inferi, though I still did most of the work.”

“Is she still helping you?”

Draco scoffed. “The fucking bitch disappeared after it was done, and I haven’t seen her since, even when I touched the opal. She can’t be relied on.”

“But you almost did the impossible. I’ve never seen Titus that scared before.”

“I savoured his expression, and I’ve replayed it in a pensieve.” Draco eyes flashed bright red. “I never planned for the inferi to succeed. I only did it as a warning and a message.”

Hermione remained confused. “How could you have— you were there? But the Aurors searched and couldn’t find you.”

Draco grinned, his crimson eyes disconcerting with a smile. “The best thing about Invisibility cloaks is that they are so rare no one ever thinks to look for one.”

Her heart skipped a beat, connecting the dots. There was only one invisibility cloak capable of use that she knew of. “Harry—”

“If you can believe it, Potter contacted me first, using information from Sirius. It turns out we have a similar goal of getting you out of Nott’s clutches, though I loathe being in his presence, and he’s shite at strategizing.”

“But they said you had an alibi—”

“I do. Potter polyjuiced into me, visiting Hogsmeade. Even shouted at the waitress, demanding better whisky. Eerie, really, how well he could wear my skin. It was probably the first time the four eyed wanker has ever felt attractive.”

Hermione laughed. It almost hurt, since she’d grown unused to the feeling.

During the execution, Harry had been disguised as Draco, causing an intentional scene for an alibi, while Draco lingered in Trafalgar Square, controlling the inferi under an invisibility cloak. It worked because not a single person would have guessed the plan, even her.

Thinking of Harry and the Order reminded her of something horrid. “Oh no.” Her stomach clenched with panic. “Fuck.”

Draco’s brows furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“Titus is going to use legilimency on me again.” She licked her lips, feeling chapped. “I’d forgotten with everything that happened. He’s giving me time now to grieve, but he won’t be lenient forever.”

The hold on her cheeks loosened, and he narrowed his burning eyes at her.

“What are you asking me?”

She grabbed his hand and held it firmly to her again. “I need you to get rid of my time with the Order, the parts he didn't see.”

The dark tear in her mind still made her dizzy. Titus' oblivation had been a knife, slicing essential parts of her away. The thought of experiencing it again caused her body to tense with anticipatory pain.

But it had to be done, and she trusted no one else but Draco with the task.

“Absolutely not.” He ripped his hand away and glared at her.

“If I don't, he might discover new information on the base and kill them all.”

“I don't give a fuck if anyone in the Order lives or dies— certainly not at the risk of damaging your mind. Meeting Sirius didn't exactly endear them to me.”

She needed his help, and arguing empathy for the organisation that killed his mum wouldn't persuade him.

“Then do it for *me*.” She saw his jaw move as if to speak and cut him off. “It wouldn't have to be anything more than blurring faces, altering a few conversations, and erasing any information on location. I know you're skilled enough to do it. I can't live with myself if more people die because of my failures.”

Draco glanced up to the ceiling, breathing hard. “I'm not fucking with your mind, Granger.”

“If you don't, then I'll find a way to do it on myself.”

He paused as if ascertaining whether she was serious and then gave a low growl of frustration. “By the gods, you're the most stubborn, infuriating witch I've ever met. You'll forget the Order. Is that what you really want?”

“When we're safe again, you can return everything to me with a projection. It won't be truly lost.”

Titus might discover other secrets while using legilimency, but those couldn't be helped, since she had to remember them. It was a necessary risk, but at least, the base would be safe.

“You make it impossible to argue with you. I should refuse on principle, but—” He squeezed his red eyes shut for a moment. “Just give me a moment to clear my thoughts. I can't have any distractions.”

---

A minute later, Draco entered her mind as he'd done earlier.

He travelled through her memories at a snail's pace. Even with a light touch, legilimency wasn't pleasant, and her stomach turned again. He bypassed the tender tear, the hole she could never fill again, unwilling to irritate it.

Bromley House appeared and then grew fuzzy. Not a full obliviation, similar to taking off glasses, making many identifying features out of focus. He allowed the time with Julie to stay — information Titus already knew.

“You said Nott already saw the Dragon Tamer?”

“Yes.”

He returned to his mission, leaving most of Charlie’s interaction in the tunnels intact, besides a few aspects of their conversation.

The image of Sirius returned with his boots on the table, tattoos displayed. Draco viewed the memory several times, intrigued at what his cousin had told her, and then he vanished it, leaving some of the visuals.

He continued with efficiency through the maze of her thoughts, stripping away the necessary things with her prompting, especially faces, resulting in a memory resembling swiss cheese. The continual confusion from the alteration made a sharp headache pound behind her eyes.

When finished, she collapsed into his arms, whimpering in pain, knowing he’d done the best he could to honour her request. She trembled with the after effects, suppressing the urge to vomit again.

Draco clutched her tight to him, whispering into her hair. “I meant to be gentle.”

“You were,” she lied, because she didn’t feel good at all.

---

They wasted the rest of their time by sitting in silence while she recovered. She used all her senses to imprint him on her soul, knowing this wouldn’t last.

Perhaps she’d never get to see him again.

Her apprehension rose with each minute, knowing when the time lapsed, she’d have to return to her cage.

Draco dragged her up to standing when the time neared, holding her cheeks firm in his hand. “Take this, and don’t open it until you know you’re safe.”

“What is it?”

“An heirloom I own that will allow me to transfer small objects to you— even past wards.” He handed her something that looked like a tiny bag. She didn’t question him further and placed it in her dress pocket to examine later.

Staring at him, Hermione couldn’t help but imagine Draco strung up like the Order members, Titus slicing through tendons and bone to decapitate him. As much as she wanted rescue, she couldn’t allow anything bad to happen to the people she cared about. For once, she decided to sacrifice what she desired.

“Your soul is already broken because of me. I want you to save what’s left of it.”

“What the fuck are you saying?” He glowered, eyes red as embers.

“Let me go.” She halfheartedly tried to yank out of his arms.

He tugged her roughly back, shaking her shoulders. “I’m never letting you go. If I thought the request was genuine, I’d honour it. But you’re only doing this out of fear, and that’s something I won’t respect.” His lips hovered close to hers.

“I don’t want to see you die! Why should we even continue doing this to ourselves?”

“Because I fucking love you!” He let his grip on her shoulders loosen, as if he was just as surprised he’d said it as she was. “Because—” He caressed her cheeks with his fingers, eyes desperately searching hers. “I love you, you stubborn witch, and you’re mine.”

“I—” she began in shock, opening and closing her mouth. Each word broke her heart. Her reciprocated feelings stuck in her throat, afraid the universe would hear it and jinx her.

“Don’t say it back. Not yet.”

“Why— why do you love me?” She needed to hear it so she had something to hold on to.

“I’m not sure when it began,” he explained. “When you walked into my manor for the first time, I thought I’d earned you. Like a prize. Winning something. I thought— well, I assumed that everything would be easy. But you were nothing like I expected. Perhaps I thought you’d be a dream instead of real. Instead, you turned out to be so fucking complicated and infuriating. At every turn you argued with me and challenged me. I thought I’d go mad. And then one day, I woke up and realised that I can’t live without you, even when I want to shake you. I didn’t want the dream of you any more. I just wanted *you*— the real you. Every broken, complicated piece.”

It hurt to think about. She almost wished he’d said nothing at all. What if none of their plans succeeded? What if she was stuck forever?

Soon Titus would begin pursuing her affections. He’d given her some space with grief, but like Lily warned, he’d eventually push that aside. “What if Titus—”

“Nothing will change how I feel about you,” he spat, looking furious that she’d even dare ask. “Anything he does will be through coercion and force, because he never let you choose in the first place. You’ll survive this, Hermione. Do you hear me? Nott thinks he can steal everything, but he can’t take your mind, no matter how he tries.” He tapped her head, and then he dropped his hand to her chest. “And he can’t steal the one thing he wants more than anything. Because you’ve already given it to me, and I’m a selfish man.”

“Everyone I care for is taken from me or dies. I’m not sure my heart can take any more loss.”

“I’m not going to die, Granger. We’re going to escape together. I swear it. But until then, I’ll make sure the Death Eaters remember what fear tastes like. I’ll remind them that they’re only

mortals, not gods. They underestimate me, which is to my advantage, because I'll outthink them all. They've grown too complacent—"

"Don't risk—"

"You don't get to tell me what I can or cannot sacrifice." His red eyes searched her face before giving her a firm kiss, letting his lips linger as long as possible. "If I have to sell my soul to Death to keep you, I will."

Noise interrupted them. Theo called her name, telling her it was time to go.

"When can I see you next?" she whispered.

"Look for me in the shadows." After a brief moment of agony, Draco transformed his eyes to pale grey, snapping his occlumency shields into place. And before she could say another word, he disappeared behind the curtains, leaving her alone.

---

Later that night, Hermione walked into the dining room. Titus sat in his normal seat near the grandfather clock, eating a piece of roast with a sharp knife that he set down upon her entrance.

He eyed her warily as she sank into a chair across from him. When the servingware filled her plate with heaping spoonfuls of food, she picked up a fork, stabbing a single pea.

She brought it to her mouth, resting the sharp points against her lips, eyes focused on her plate. Titus remained a statue while waiting, tense lines in his shoulders.

Opening her mouth, she placed the pea inside and began to chew. It tasted like dirt and went down like glue, but she'd managed it.

Titus sagged in relief, resting his elbows on the table, head in his hands. "Thank fucking Merlin." He drew in a jagged breath. "You'll be okay, Sprite. I promise you."

She'd let him believe the lie, if it made him feel better.

As she ate her food, one bite at a time, ignoring Titus' heavy stare, she thought over the reasons to continue living that she'd compiled on her journey back to the manor:

Hermione would survive for the little girl she used to be.

She'd survive for her dead parents.

She'd survive for her remaining friends.

She'd survive for Finch's memory.

And she'd survive for Draco.



Hermione took another bite of food, chewing with determination, every ounce of will power infused into the action, shoving her pain back into a black box with a lock. The empty space it left was replaced by a quiet rage that vibrated alongside her magic under her shackles, begging to be released. Her heart hardened into something unyielding.

Remembering Lily's words, the path forward cleared in her mind. The Death Eaters had built their society on lavish excess at the expense of human suffering, and it couldn't last forever.

She'd make sure of it.

Draco had vowed to rescue her, but Hermione now wanted nothing more than to burn the pureblood society to the ground, scorching everything as she went, salting the earth so nothing could regrow. They'd regret ever giving her a sliver of magic.

And she planned to begin her path of destruction right in the center of the beast.

Slowly, she dragged her eyes up from her plate, locking her icy stare with Titus'. He still seemed wary— and he should be wary of her.

Because more than anything, Hermione would survive for revenge.

---

Art Work: It's been unstable and keeps erasing. Hang with me while I figure out a solution. Until then, go check out two amazing art pieces from Frau Blucher. [Chapter 45](#) and [Chapter 46!!](#)

## Chapter End Notes

TW: Character Death, suicide, suicide ideation, grief/ mourning, cessation of eating due to grief (not an eating disorder, but it's close enough that I felt it needed mentioning).

Gentle Reminder: The fic is already heavily tagged. Anything could happen (or not) in this fic. I give no promises of anything, including any Titus/Hermione content, who will live or die, (besides DHr), etc. While I welcome opinions and reactions, any comments attempting to bully me into plot choices will be deleted.

For my Titus fans: I'll be writing an AU Titus-wins-the-Trials Titmione endgame after House Pet wraps up. It will be a Dead Dove because of the dynamics, with a surface-

level HEA

# Chapter 48: Achilles Heel

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion:

Two Feet– “Caviar”

Moulin Rouge Soundtrack– “El Tango De Roxanne”

Thank you to the greatest beta of all time, MyPrivateInsanity, and to my wonderful alpha team’s eagle eyes.

Trigger Warning at the end:

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

## Achilles Heel

Soft fur brushed against Hermione’s fingers. She groaned in her sleep, just enough aware to remember everything she wished to forget. Hermione dreaded the initial exit from dreamland — an untangling of reality every morning where her brain tricked her into thinking Finch still lived, and she’d wake in Draco’s arms. It resulted in a slicing pain that she struggled to force down into numbness.

A loud hiss interrupted her routine grief, and before she could fully wake, a flash of orange hopped over her, claws attaching to the body beside her.

Titus bolted upright with a startled shout, shoving her to the side. Sheets tangled around her legs as she scrambled away, watching him grapple with a familiar ball of fur. He finally ripped Crookshanks away by the scruff of his neck, holding firm as her cat twisted and bit, claws still embedded in his wrist.

“You rabid kneazle.” He brought him closer to glare. She could have sworn her familiar glared right back. “I’m glad you found your way back home, Crooks, but if you assault me one more time, I’ll put you in a cage until you’ve learned some manners.” He pulled him even closer. “And I’ll make sure you can’t easily traipse in and out of it like you apparently can do with the house wards.”

Crookshanks hissed, but ceased his attack, as if he’d comprehended every word.

“I think we’ve arrived at an understanding.” Titus gave a single rough pet to his head as her cat’s ears flattened, and then thrust the angry kneazle into Hermione’s arms. She held the volatile warmth close until her familiar calmed.

Titus huffed in frustration, examining his bleeding scratches, healing them before getting out of bed. Like always, he slept without a shirt, and she averted her eyes as he changed.

“He was just protecting me.” Safe now to look, she glanced up to see him buttoning up a shirt. By his formalwear, he appeared to be going to the ministry, probably to speak to the Wizengamot or finish paperwork.

“That’s why I’ll forgive him.” He fixed his tie into a perfect knot.

The lonely, miserable part of her heart almost asked if Titus could bring her along to the ministry, just to have something to do. But he would enjoy her request too much, so she kept silent and leaned back into her pillow, hating his comfortable bed.

Since the pond incident, he hadn’t let her sleep anywhere else. Even if she retreated to her old room, she’d wake up as he carried her, face resting against his bare chest, his arms wrapped around her as they both sank into his mattress. Sometimes, like the night before, she didn’t wake at all, and the shift of location confused her.

“Enjoy your day. I’ll be home earlier than usual. Tomorrow morning—” he hesitated while attaching his knife and wand into hidden holsters along his chest and took a deep breath. “Tomorrow I’ll need to fill in the blanks from your time with the Order. I’ve given you more than enough time to adjust. No need to worry.” He must have seen her body tense. “If you cooperate, it will be painless.”

“And if I *don’t* cooperate?”

“Don’t put me in that position,” he warned. “If you’re feeling under the weather today, tell Bitty, and I’ll come straight home to take care of you.”

That seemed odd and off topic. “Why would I feel under the weather?”

“There’s a bad case of mumblemumps going around. I might have carried it home by accident.”

She had a sixth sense that he’d lied, but she didn’t understand why.

“But you—”

“Just promise you’ll tell Bitty if you need me.”

Hermione frowned but gave a single nod.

Satisfied with her answer, he wrapped his cloak around his shoulders, avoiding her confusion as he swept out of the room, leaving her alone. Her stomach sank, thinking of what was to come.

Draco hadn't erased the memories of their meeting, and she knew he never would, even if she asked. He wanted her to remember every second of their time together, even if it meant risking discovery.

And Lily— she had to keep the memory or else she couldn't complete her mission.

But how could she protect them?

Masters at legilimency like Titus would enter her mind with a specific purpose and location, discarding anything unnecessary. Given that fact, he might never stumble across the memories. However, she struggled with occlumency. An errant thought might lead him to things she wished to keep hidden.

Hermione held a single advantage: Titus was now as wary of entering her mind as she was of him lingering in her thoughts.

"I knew you'd find me again," she whispered to Crookshanks, who now purred and kneaded his paws into the blanket along her legs. She thought of Draco, all alone in the manor, with nothing to comfort him. Hermione scratched behind her cat's ears. "I need you Crooks, and I wish you could stay, but I think Draco needs you more right now. Go back to him."

Hermione didn't know if Crookshanks truly understood her, but by the next morning, he'd disappeared again.

---

The interrogation occurred in Titus' study. He led her there, hand on the small of her back. He was tense, as if he thought she'd fight him, only relaxing when he forced her to sit in a stuffed chair on the other side of his desk. She remained rigid, hands twisted together in her lap, thinking of the mental shelves that she'd just begun to rebuild.

Though he'd been occluding since breakfast, mouth thin with pressure, an emotion broke through Titus' expression— one she found hard to place, even after years of reading him.

Bitty popped into the room with tea and biscuits. Titus thanked the little elf as she disappeared.

Hermione sensed they were about to begin a serious game of chess.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"No."

"Thirsty?" Titus picked up a delicate, flowered teacup and pushed it toward her.

"No."

"I insist."

"You laced it with veritaserum."

He sighed and leaned back, interlocking his fingers on his chest. “Drink it all, or I’ll enter your mind again. I plan to do this without legilimency, if I can.”

Hermione didn’t want to drink the tea, but it remained a better alternative than him rifling through her mind. She reached out and grasped the cup, watching him over the porcelain rim as she finished the contents and set it back down on the desk with a click— a signal to begin.

“What did you discuss with Sirius Black when you first met him?”

She attempted to block the answer, but her mouth opened. “I don’t remember.”

He narrowed his eyes as if she’d lied, though that would be impossible.

“Did he mention your father?”

“He must have,” she conceded, because Charlie gave her the parchments. It appeared to have been important enough information for her to insist on memory modification to conceal it.

“But I don’t remember.”

His jaw tensed, showing his frustration.

“Can you give me any names of other Order members, besides Weasley, Sirius, and the Potter boy?”

“No.”

A long moment of silence occurred as he sorted through the implications with a sneer. “He erased your memory— and you *let* him.”

He said that as if she was a hypocrite.

Titus hadn’t posed a true question and only used the pronoun *he* in reference to Sirius, so she responded truthfully, knowing she’d stepped into dangerous territory. “I don’t remember,” she repeated. “But I suppose *he* did erase the important things.”

“Fucking hell.” He threw the empty teacup he’d been holding. It remained intact, protected by cushioning charms, bouncing until it rolled along the wooden floorboards. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“You didn’t ask.” Hermione played her old tricks with him, using the truth to cover a lie.

“Charlie told me they might, as a precaution.”

“That is their practice,” he acknowledged. “I’ve come to realise that the entire Black family makes up ninety percent of my problems.” He ran a hand along his face in irritation. “Sirius is strategic. I’ll give him that. He doesn’t allow anyone to have enough information to do significant damage, obliviates members when he feels he needs to, and he keeps the bases as separate as possible. This makes it very hard to pin him down.” He paused, letting his eyes rove over her. “He was unusually sloppy with you though, leaving several memories intact that he should have erased— and I wonder why.”

“They probably thought I would stay,” she answered quickly— maybe too quickly.

“And would you have?” His tone turned dark.

“I don’t think so,” she answered. “I only went for Julie.”

He sighed. “I don’t enjoy interrogating you like this.”

“Then stop. I’m telling you the truth, of course. I don’t remember anything important about my time with the Order.”

He held his jaw, rubbing along his stubble. After a few moments of deep thought, he sat upright. Opening the top drawer— the one where he kept his potions and other important items — he tugged out a bundle of scrolls she recognized.

The information about her father.

“This was an interesting read.” He placed the scrolls on the desk between them. “I knew some of it already, but the timeline illuminated what went on behind the scenes of my parents’ murders. However, there are still a lot of missing pieces I’ll need to obtain to understand it better.”

“That’s mine.” Hermione dug her fingernails into her palm. She wished to reach over and rip what belonged to her from his thieving fingers.

“What exactly in this rubbish do you claim as *yours*?”

“It’s my history, even if you find it abhorrent.” Hermione placed a hand over her heart. “Don’t take it from me as you’ve done with everything else.”

“You call me a monster, but if I am, then so was your father. Reading through this made me thankful we stopped him when we did.” He glared at the parchment as if it would come alive to battle him. “When you’ve finally proven your loyalty to me, I’ll allow you to read it, so that you can finally see the Order and your father for exactly who they were.” He opened the drawer and once again tucked the parchments away under blood wards.

Hermione had known Titus found the documents during her arrest from the pouch on her leg, and she also suspected he’d have destroyed them if it wouldn’t have upset her. As it were, he seemed wary of doing anything that might push her over the edge again. Instead, he dangled the knowledge like a carrot to a rabbit, tempting her to surrender for a bite.

“Are you going to enter my mind now, or can I leave?”

“I’m done for today.” Titus stood, his chair creaking. As he made to move past her, he stopped abruptly, grabbing her jaw and lifting it toward him, finger holding her chin up to force eye contact. Her breath caught at the sudden movement, giving away her fear that he might enter her mind by surprise.

“I’ve been so gentle with you, and yet you still tremble as if I’d hurt you.” He furrowed his brow, clearly disturbed by her reaction. “Even with the veritaserum, I don’t believe you’ve

told me the complete truth. You're clever enough to get around it. And yet I—" he closed his eyes without finishing his thought.

She stayed silent, unwilling to give him anything, not even a single blink that could give her away.

"I doubt any information you'd have would be vital enough to risk another lash of hatred from you. I'm tired, Sprite. Consider this my olive branch."

He let her go and left her alone to stare at the desk, watching Atherol Nott, the dragon knight, brandish his sword.

Hermione didn't trust his truce. She believed he'd have entered her mind if he thought he could.

Titus simply feared what she might show him.

---

Three days later, Hermione recovered the bag that Draco had given her from the base of a mermaid fountain in the maze—a section the elves rarely visited. Knowing Titus would be gone most of the day, she brought it to the treehouse and appeased her curiosity.

"Open," she whispered. Charmed to expand with intent, it enlarged in her grasp. About the size of a suitcase, a giant metal clasp kept the black leather sack locked together. Though absent of dark magic, it consisted of charms she'd never encountered, probably a cousin to the expansion charms she'd used on her purse. She marvelled at the advanced magic for a moment, wondering what other old, useful items Draco kept in his vaults.

Without hesitating, she opened the metal clasp. It resisted at first, slightly rusty, and she had to pry it open with a crack. In an experiment, she placed her hand in the void, encountering the silk walls of the bag. It contained nothing but a parchment, along with a quill and an inkpot, which she pulled out.

After unfurling the crisp paper, she breathed a sigh of relief, recognizing Draco's handwriting.

**Granger,**

***We can communicate with this. Just place a note or a request inside and close the clasp. I have it charmed to alert me if you do. I can send anything back that fits within the constraints of the bag and that isn't alive— though sometimes it can be finicky about the definition. I've found that potions and some charmed objects tend to stay behind.***

***All my love,***

**Draco**

She wrote back two feet of notes, spending most of the day drafting her complicated thoughts. How much she missed him. Her boredom. If he had Crookshanks. Explaining Titus' failed interrogation.



When it finally arrived at the end, Hermione paused, letting the ink blotch on the paper. What did she want to ask him to send, exactly?

Books, of course. But she also needed to be strategic. Without sending her note through, she curled it up and shrunk the bag, until she'd gathered her thoughts.

That night an idea struck, so suddenly she almost fell out of her chair at dinner. Titus looked at her strangely, and she only stared back, wondering if what she considered would be possible.

"Are you okay?" he asked, clearing his throat.

"I'm fine."

It took all of her patience to wait until the next day to send through the long note.

***Since you cannot send a potion, how about you send a cauldron. A medium sized one, maybe with the same shrinking charms you placed on the bag to hide it better. I'll also need potion books. On the darker side, preferably.***

A minute later, paper fluttered in the void of the bag.

***Don't worry about Crooks. He found his way back to the manor, though he's not happy about it. I suspect the orange menace is planning a revolt against me with the peacocks. I fear he's not content unless he's meting out some form of violence. But on to the more important point— what are you planning, Granger? If it's a potion you need, I could arrange a meeting and give it to you. This sounds like an unnecessary risk.***

Hermione held her pen harder than normal, unwilling to be swayed even by Draco.

***Not this one. It needs to be brewed on the grounds to be effective. I've forgotten the name of the potion and the ingredients, but I'm certain I've read about it before from a book in your library. Most likely from an older text.***

She shoved her answer inside. Almost immediately, Draco's response shot back though.

***How will you get the ingredients? The bag might not send through anything it considers living, which constitutes several plants.***

That would be a problem, especially if it required a rare or dangerous one. Hermione nibbled on her lip. The potion she thought of would need to be brewed for at least two months, and she wasn't certain when the next time she'd get to see Draco.

***I'll figure out a way.***

---

Weeks passed consisting of a similar routine to Hermione's life before the Trials. She spent her days reading through the potion books Draco sent to no avail, sending messages back and forth. In her extra free time, she attempted to build occlumency shelves through meditation

and, like she did as a child, used a stick to practise old and new spells, unwilling to let her magic wither. Even with filling her time, her mind still teetered on the brink of madness.

Sometime in early December, Titus woke her up by twisting a curl along his finger.

“Good morning.” His chest rumbled under her ear.

She jerked back, slapping away his hand. He stared at his fingers, before dropping them.

“Would you like to go to Hogsmead with me today?”

Her whole body hurt with the thought. “No.”

Titus sighed deeply and rose to begin his morning routine as she swiped her hand along her face to get rid of the feeling of warm skin on her cheek. She hated that he capitalised on her vulnerable moments, counting on her desperate need for human contact.

“Normally, you’d be dying to go,” he said while getting dressed.

“I’d rather rot with boredom than spend the day with you.”

The knife she’d twisted proved effective in hurting his feelings, and his shoulders tensed. He went over to his wardrobe and yanked out a casual shirt, indicating he didn’t have work today. He tugged it over his head, and she was glad for it, because she was tired of viewing his stupid, muscled chest and back, disgusted with how aesthetically pleasing he looked, despite her hating him.

“Tomorrow you have no choice but to go out,” he warned. “There’s a muggleborn luncheon, and you’ll attend.”

“I thought Lucius advised you to keep me away from the dinners.”

“It’s been months, and you’ll only be allowed at a few locations, heavily monitored. I’ll make sure nothing happens.”

She almost argued, but he sent her a withering look that showed he wouldn’t bend.

Hermione leaned back into the bed, realising her isolation, both self-imposed from grief and forced by Titus, was drawing to a close.

---

The morning before a special Christmas Gala at the beginning of December, the ministry hosted the muggleborn luncheon. Dressed in a new blue silk dress, Hermione dreaded each step through the floo and the atrium, trying to forget what had happened the last time she’d been there.

Fairy lights glittered around them. Fake icicles dangled from the ceiling. Tinsel and mistletoe in corners, wreaths and long evergreen garlands swagging along the walls, evoking a false warmth in the usually cold environment.

“Why do I have to be here?” she whispered, bypassing the fountain. Someone had placed a red hat on the wizard, along with a necklace made of bells and holly.

“You have to get back to normal life. A little push out of the nest is what you need. Staying in the manor all by yourself and sleeping half the day can't be healthy. I wouldn't encourage you to attend if I didn't think you needed it.”

The ministry had organised the luncheon in the ballroom on the third floor. Hermione followed Titus as he entered the lift, and once inside, she picked at the fabric of her blue dress. The movement caused Titus to glance down at her fidgeting.

“Try not to be so nervous,” he whispered. “Socialising will be good for you.”

“I don't want to see her. Or any of them, really.”

She meant Katie. By his sudden frown, she didn't need to explain.

Titus shook his head. “In your attempt to hurt people, you're also hurting yourself. If you don't reconcile and learn to forgive, I think you'd regret it for the rest of your life. For once, soften your stubborn side.”

Would she regret it?

Hermione wished for her friend— ached for her— but she couldn't mend or replace the tear in her heart.

Even with forgiveness, even with reconciliation, it would never be the same again.

“She—”

“Blame me, if it makes it easier. She made the decision under duress.”

“I am perfectly capable of blaming *two* people.”

The lift stopped with an abrupt shake, and he forced her out, allowing a ministry elf to take her cloak. From there, it proved to be just a short journey down the corridor to the ballroom. When the double doors opened, exposing the familiar crowd within, all eyes turned to her, surrounded by the same Christmas decorations as in the atrium. The chatter ceased beyond a few whispers, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

Hermione wished to hide from the unwanted attention. Taken from a Malfoy by the Wizengamot and given to the Butcher— she could just imagine the salacious gossip.

Before she could run back to the lift, Titus twisted her toward him and kissed her forehead. “Remember what I said. Stop pushing people away who love you. Go talk to Katie. It might be uncomfortable at first, but I'm confident you'll mend the rift.”

He looked as if he wished to kiss her goodbye. But instead, he let her go, giving a single wink before exiting.

Hermione didn't want Titus to stay, but without him, she was alone. Remaining at the doors like an awkwardly-placed statue, she didn't know where to go. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Katie standing by her table next to a heavily pregnant Zala, giving a small wave and a soft, pleading expression— an obvious invitation.

The moment of truth. She could do as Titus wished and sit with her old friends.

Or she could hold firm in her previous decision of severing contact.

Hermione allowed the memory of the Trial to wash over her. It was enough to find the strength to ignore Katie's invitation and walk to the refreshment table, hating the stares from her fellow muggleborns. Hating that, once again, she managed to be the center of gossip.

Not knowing where to go, she wasted time lingering near the punchbowl. The thought of sitting at a new table and trying to make new friends sounded horrible. And she refused to go back to her old group. She'd rather converse with the mantichore that had chased her in the Trials.

In fact— that sounded like a perfect alternative.

After a quick search, she found the group's bad-tempered hermit near a corner by herself.

While Hermione dragged a chair nearby and collapsed on it, Carmen threw her a blistering glare with her striking green eyes. "Go sit with your friends."

Since Carmen had knocked into her so rudely at her first luncheon, Hermione hadn't paid much attention to her or cared to interact. She always sat off by herself, unwilling to fit into any circle of muggleborns.

"They aren't my friends," Hermione answered, crossing her arms. "Not anymore."

"Well, I'm not your friend either."

"Good."

"Great." Carmen flicked her dark hair off her shoulder. "Don't talk to me then."

"I'd rather not talk at all."

"Then why sit next to me?"

Hermione shrugged. "Misery loves company, I suppose."

As desired, they both stewed in silence for a long time. Each moment dragged until Carmen reached into her pocket, hidden by her voluminous skirt, and pulled out a flask. A potent scent of firewhisky exited when she uncapped it, taking a furtive swig. After swallowing a few more times, she held it out to Hermione.

"I smuggled this in. Don't be too obvious when you drink. They only allow wine."

Hermione normally hated hard liquor, but the thought of something burning her throat and numbing her mind sounded nice.

“Sure.” Hermione grabbed the flask, downing her own gulp. Just like she suspected, it burned. And it was just nasty enough it brought her mind out of darkness as she coughed and gagged.

“You’re trusting.” Carmen gave her an amused side eye. “That could have been poisoned.”

Hermione wiped a droplet off her lips. “Or I just don’t care anymore.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Why would you get in trouble for whisky and not wine?” She finally managed to be curious about something.

“Wine’s effects on pregnancy can be prevented with a charm. Whisky can still do damage, if it’s not caught in time, especially in the early months. My master is too old and stupid to know that though.”

Hermione read between the lines.

“You get rid of your—”

“I stay pregnant long enough to avoid a serious investigation of infertility. Then I ingest a cocktail of innocuous herbs growing freely in the gardens. It’s better than being born into this. Don’t you agree?”

Carmen drank heavily and ingested abortifacients. Smart and semi-effective. Also dangerous. If she birthed a baby with deformities because of alcohol poisoning, she’d be punished severely. And if they caught her aborting during an investigation, the consequences would be even worse.

Hermione glanced around. The decorations. The food. The dresses. The laughter. On the surface, this world sparkled, especially compared to the muggle cities. But it’s underbelly rotted, built off suffering and slavery, caged in by a mist ready to devour them.

“Yes, it’s better they are not brought into this world,” she agreed.

Carmen took back her flask and hid it inside her dress pocket. “Heard you’re with the Butcher.”

“I am.”

“I’m sorry.” It was the first kind words she’d heard from the woman.

“Don’t feel sorry for me. My situation is kinder than most.” Hermione closed her eyes, wishing to find a pond to sink into. “You should know that when I first saw you, I pitied you, thinking your solitude was foolish.”

Carmen pressed her hand to the flask in her pocket, as if she desired another drink. “Unfortunately, your initial instinct was right. I’m a pitiful creature, and my solitude is probably foolish. If you’re around me enough, you might catch my cynicism like a disease.”

Hermione only laughed. “If you can’t tell, I’m already sick with cynicism. At this point, I’d light this whole place on fire if I could.”

She waited in the pregnant pause, wondering if whispering her desires of revenge went too far.

But Carmen only gave a hard smirk made of iron and pain. “In my dreams, I do too.”

---

Later in the evening, Bitty arrived in her room with a dress from Titus— a deep red velvet that went to the floor, covering most of her chest in a conservative way. It would have stayed conservative, if not for the scandalous slit all the way to her hip. The back dipped low, showcasing bare skin and an impressive web of rose-cut diamonds, trailing down her spine and laced across in a delicate pattern.

After getting dressed, she sat at the vanity and applied her makeup in the way Tabitha taught her, painting her lips a blood red, wearing matching diamond earrings. After finishing, she allowed Bitty to apply a charm to straighten her hair as much as possible, slicking it up in a complicated twist.

Hermione was sitting on the vanity bench, in the process of putting on her red spiked heels. Titus walked into the room, placing a hand along the doorframe, his heavy signet ring clicking on contact. “You take my breath away.”

“If only that were literal,” she said without meeting his gaze.

He looked unfairly handsome in his perfectly tailored suit, dark hair combed to the side. His eyes glowed bright blue in the soft light.

“I’m glad you’re feeling well enough for sarcasm.” Titus let go of the doorframe and crossed the room with heavy footsteps, stopping to stand behind her at the vanity. A single calloused finger touched her neck, tracing down the curve to her shoulder. “This dress cost me a fortune.”

She bet it did, since the diamonds draped along the bare skin of her back looked real, crystal clear, giant, and skillfully cut.

“Someone found the originals inside the vaults at a muggle royal bunker, surprisingly protected by magical wards. I had them refashioned by a master jeweller.”

“Royalty?” she reared back in surprise, touching a teardrop earring. How much blood was spilled to obtain them? She wondered what happened to the muggle royals. Were they still alive? The realistic side of her mind doubted it. Figureheads were always the first to be executed.

“I want you to feel like a queen beside me.” He held out his hand for her to take. She glared at it as if it would bite her, but allowed him to pull her to standing. “One more thing.” He accioed a familiar length of red fabric from the closet into his hold.

“I’m not wearing that.”

“Don’t be obstinate. It’s winter.” He slid the cloak onto her shoulders without her help. When secure, he settled the soft hood on her head.

It had nothing to do with the cold. He only wanted the opportunity to drape her in the gift he’d given so long ago— the representation of what he’d planned for her.

Hermione clenched her fists before loosening her grasp. She wished to fight his commands, but it would be a losing battle. She’d save her energy for important things.

“How long will we have to stay?”

“Not long,” he promised. “I don’t like these events either.” His eyes flicked up with a grin that showed off one of his dimples. “Personally, I’d rather spend my night with you.”

The nerves in her lower stomach tightened. The way he looked at her— as if he wished to consume her— she understood the wait to begin seducing her had lapsed.

“Who are we sitting with?” she asked as he led her out of the room. She wobbled on her heels the length of the corridor, only finding her footing closer to the sitting room.

“People you’ll need to behave around.”

She could surmise who it would be. “I’m not sitting next to Dolohov to have a pleasant chat.”

“You will if I tell you to.” Reaching the floo, he placed his hand in his pocket, taking out his wand. “Obedience tonight is not a choice. While I don’t mind your sarcasm and wit, I won’t allow any theatrics. Since nothing else has worked to retract your claws, I’ve decided to get creative.”

He mumbled a spell and flicked his wand toward her leg. A dark shadow resembling a hand exited the tip and disintegrated into the fabric of her dress, reforming around her upper thigh, invisible to the naked eye.

Hermione tried to brush off the odd sensation, but since it was made of shadow, it stayed put. “What did you do?”

“It’s a common spell. Not taught in school, of course, but most women know it.” He smirked, eyes lit with a secret pleasure. “Tonight we’ll play a game. Every time you say something out of line—” He crooked a finger up. As if a mirror, the shadow finger brushed higher.

Hermione gasped as it left a cold caress behind, electrifying her skin. “If you behave, then I’ll release the spell by the end of the night.”

“What happens if I mess up?” she fumed.

“Then I’ll take that as your permission to *play*.”

If she did anything he deemed disobedient, he’d let the ghost hand roam as it pleased.

The nerves in her stomach bundled even tighter, sending sparks of tension down her legs.

“You told me you wouldn’t touch me yet.”

He knew what she meant. “Technically, I’m not touching you at all. Only you can feel the caress of the spell.”

Titus grabbed a handful of powder, as she took a deep breath, determined not to say a word the whole night.

“Ready?”

“I’d rather dine with an acromantula.”

“Sprite—

“Don’t worry.” Hermione stepped toward the floo. “I’ll try to be your good little house pet tonight.”

As he threw the powder into the fireplace, he tugged her hips backward, so she pressed against his hard chest. Leaning over her shoulder, stubble scratching her skin, he whispered low in her ear. “If I’m being honest, I’m hoping you’re just a little bit naughty.”

As he pushed her forward again, the ghost hand gave a squeeze along her thigh, reminding her of the consequences of disobedience.

---

When they arrived back at the ministry, Titus unclasped each of their cloaks and handed them to an elf.

The ministry ballroom already hosted a sizable crowd, much larger than the events she’d attended in the past. The colours— red, blue, and green— still popped across the room like flowers. Hermione suspected everyone would be on their best behaviour tonight due to the location, especially since Dolohov, along with most of the Wizengamot, would be attending.

Similar to the cathedral, muggle dancers floated across the stage in short dresses in a rainbow of colours. Beaded fringe whipped side to side with each sway of their hips. A lady stood in the center in front of a microphone, singing low and raspy to the fast tempo of the orchestra behind her.

It sounded lovely. Hermione found herself mesmerised. A touch of Titus’ hand brought her back into focus, as they weaved through the crowd.

Katie, Marcus, Zala, and Thorfinn were at a table near the front, but Titus thankfully led her in the opposite direction.



“The seats are assigned,” he explained. “We’ll be with the other Mediators and the Chief Warlock.”

Her stomach soured. “Oh goody, all of my favourite people in one place.”

He ignored her comment as he pushed her to the front, past tables of visiting dignitaries as well as other government officials. The people gave him respected nods as he easily cut a path through the crowd. Most of the wizarding world seemed to have been invited.

She searched the crowd for Draco’s bright blond hair, usually a beacon, desperate to see even a glimpse of him for comfort, but the multitude of people made it impossible to find him.

Hermione sensed the wary eyes of the crowd on her as they walked. She wasn’t quite sure what the general population knew about her escape and fight at the camps, or of her killing wizards. Did Titus only give the information to his aurors during the arrest and suppress the rest? The shackles clamped along her wrists still leashed her, even though Titus had placed a concealment charm on them, along with her universe necklace, so as not to ruin the aesthetic of the evening.

“Right here,” he whispered.

Dolohov had positioned himself closest to the stage in a well-tailored suit; he gave a brief nod to Titus while sipping from a glass of whisky. A man she didn’t recognize sat beside him with a pretty young woman in a green dress and a halo of red hair perched on his knee. When they arrived, the woman’s eyes snapped up, met hers, giving an odd, confused smile before laughing about something her date said.

A Weasley— she knew that much. The hair gave it away. Something about the woman seemed very familiar, as if she’d seen her before, though she couldn’t place where.

The rest of the table consisted of McNair, Avery, Walter Filibus— and Nera Zabini.

Hermione almost groaned in dread.

“I see you’ve had a change of ownership, house pet.” Nera’s mouth curled into a smirk as sharp as knives. “Wouldn’t you have liked a newer model, Titus? By this point, the girl is probably well-used.”

Titus straightened his shoulders, adjusting his cuffs. “Well-used? How many suitors have you had again? In fact, while we’re counting bodies, how many of them have mysteriously died?”

Nera’s mask wavered, teeth and eyes briefly changing shape before going back to normal. “Those are malicious rumours, and I won’t tolerate having them repeated in my presence.”

Titus scoffed.

“Is it possible for the two of you to be in the same space without bickering?” Filibus snaked an arm around Nera’s back, rubbing her arm as if to comfort her. They didn’t match as a

couple, and Hermione wondered what sort of power the part-veela gained by being on his arm. “And Hermione, excuse Nera’s rude welcome. You look lovely.”

The table waited for a response— a thank you— but she pressed her lips together. Titus squeezed her hand, but she refused to thank the man who helped ruin her life. Walter may look like a feeble old man, but he still thought of her like an animal.

A burning rage engulfed her, so powerful that tiny shocks of accidental magic pushed past the obsidian.

“Thank you, Filibus,” Titus finally answered for her. He glanced down at her wrists with narrowed eyes, lowering himself into his assigned chair. An empty seat had been set aside for her, but before she could sit, Titus grabbed her hips and forced her to collapse into his lap. He held her firmly in place when she tried to get back up.

"Don't cause a scene," he whispered low.

Hermione refused to relax. She glanced around, finding Nera’s focus still zeroed in on her as if studying potential prey.

“How is the savage adjusting to a new master?” Nera drummed her sharp nails on the table. “You always were a bit of a sop for her, Titus. I assume she has a golden cunt for all the trouble you went through.”

“At least I—” Hermione silenced her retort when Titus placed a hand on her knee in warning. With one finger, he firmly brushed up along the velvet. The shadow hand followed the movement, going high enough she withheld a gasp.

Strike one, she assumed. Hermione bit her tongue.

"Still haven't fully broken her in, I see," Dolohov remarked, finally examining her.

“Why would I do that? I enjoy her as she is.” Titus rested one large hand along her hip. “She keeps me on my toes, and I’m never bored. I didn’t pursue a lion in the hopes she’d be a kitten. Once she settles, my sons will benefit from having a fierce mother... my daughters too.”

Hermione grimaced. Just how many children did he expect them to have?

Dolohov only tilted his glass of whisky toward Titus, as if he’d made a great point. It was strange to see him at a party. He didn't seem the type to enjoy the food, crowds, or women.

“Well said.” The man she didn’t recognize raised his glass.

“Here Here, Rosier,” Filibus raised his glass as well. They took sips of their alcohol to congratulate themselves while Hermione did everything in her power to control her expression of disgust.

Rosier? Hermione remembered an old man leering at her in a darkened room full of smoke at the Goyle seaside castle. The man before her must be his son. Though he appeared middle

aged, he remained handsome in a classical way. The Weasley girl— Ginny, she remembered Theo telling her— leaned into his shoulder with a giggle, cheeks blooming pink with alcohol. Hermione tried not to be disturbed by the age difference. Rosier seemed old enough to be her father.

"The dancers are so gauche," Nera complained, turning to Filibus. "I can't believe we allow such vulgar entertainment."

Dolohov shrugged. "The others like it. And if muggles are good for anything, it's entertainment."

"True," Nera crooned in a seductive voice. "They aren't worth much beyond that and the labour they provide."

Hermione couldn't help but think of the fields of workers. Blistered skin. Skinny frames. Wounds from abuse. The starvation made a distinct contrast to the excess around her. She rested her hand instinctively on a sharp steak knife in front of her, just to feel a weapon close, imagining stabbing the woman.

Titus noticed and subtly slipped it away. He grinned as if amused and leaned forward to whisper. "Should I take your fork away too so you don't hurt someone?"

"If you wish. I think I could still do damage with a spoon."

Even without seeing him, she could feel his quiet laugh. "You need to ignore Nera. She wants a reaction."

Hermione knew that. "I've controlled myself so far. Haven't I?"

It was harder than she thought it would be to swallow her impulse to react when provoked.

"Just in case." He crooked a finger on the tablecloth and the shadow hand trailed up resting against her in the middle of her knickers. She gasped at the sensation, cool and slightly vibrating.

She shifted in her seat, but it only pressed more firmly, right over her clit. "But I didn't do anything!"

"It's preemptive."

"That's not fair."

"Think of it this way," he answered. "You'll now have something else to focus on."

If she wanted to survive this night, Hermione needed to control herself better. Detach from the people and the situation.

"Let me do the talking," he whispered. "Just relax and enjoy yourself."

Hermione bristled, but tried to do as he wished. When Titus settled his arm along her waist, she leaned back into his hold, head on his shoulder, grasping a wine glass that floated by on a tray.

Within thirty minutes, the dinner service had arrived and gone. She hadn't touched the food, only sipped on the wine until heat sprouted in her stomach, running along her veins, generating a pleasant state of mind which she curled into, desperate for an outlet.

The shadow hand tortured her the entire time, inducing a simmering pleasure that tingled along her lower nerves without her permission, leaving her breathless.

"I've learned my lesson," she whispered much later into the night, listening to his chest rumble under her ear as he talked and laughed. Sweat beaded along the nape of her neck in the effort to keep her face neutral.

"Have you?"

He didn't take off the hand, probably enjoying her desperation for cessation or release like the psychopath he was. She bit her bottom lip, hoping no one else noticed her sharp breaths or the way her hips slowly tilted into the sensation, searching for more.

So buzzed and edged, she didn't notice that Nera had relocated to the empty seat beside them—the one meant for her. Titus had been having a serious discussion with McNair about a camp in the north, so he didn't notice Nera locking eyes with her. Or at least, he didn't acknowledge it.

Nera had her nails splayed in front of her on the table with a bottle of nail polish. In smooth strokes, the veela applied a top coat, strangely tinted green and without the usual odour. The action felt out of place against the setting, luring Hermione's attention to the precise movements.

"It's poison," Nera answered without her having to ask, noticing her scrutiny. "It needs to be applied every two hours to be effective. A woman should always have a surprise weapon on her." When finished, she inspected the shiny polish in the light, blowing softly to dry it. "But still, even with a weapon, a person also needs to have the capability to deliver the killing bite. It's much harder than people believe, separating the weak from the strong. Some people are predators and the rest are prey. The world is cruel in that way. We're much alike in that sense. My son—"

"Your son's a monster."

She gave a musical laugh. "Of course, he is. I forced him to be. As a little boy, he was weak. Future prey. Didn't want to hurt or kill at first, but I stamped that softness out of him quickly. We must do what we can in this world to raise our children to survive."

Nera had purposely trained Blaise to be violent in the way Lucius trained Draco. By Zabini's cruelty, she suspected his mind must have cracked in the wrong way. She wondered who Blaise would have been if he'd been allowed to stay soft.

“You went too far with him,” Hermione whispered, finding it hard to keep her mouth shut like she had before— a mixture of alcohol and the searing torture of the hand fraying her sanity.

“Perhaps,” she shrugged, unbothered by the criticism. “Though a madman is usually the victorious one, and that’s all that matters.” She narrowed her bright eyes in thought. “If he’d gotten you like he first wanted, I bet you would’ve killed him within the year. However— as long as there had been a strong heir to show for it, I believe it might have been worth it. Instead, I got pathetic Julie.”

Hermione tensed.

“*Don’t* say her name.” Mind muddled with alcohol, and nearing the end of her control, if the woman didn’t shut the fuck up, Hermione wasn’t sure she’d hold back.

She tried to ignore her like Titus wanted, but the woman kept speaking.

“She was just a second place trophy,” Nera sneered, ignoring her warning. “I almost considered getting rid of the bitch on principle, even pregnant. She would’ve begged me not to—”

Hermione snapped, flicking the goblet in her hand, sending the wine to splatter across the Veela.

Nera gave a gasp, and the table went silent. Hermione drank in the veela’s sputtering shock.

Before she could regret her action, Titus ripped the empty goblet from Hermione’s hands and caged them to her sides. “Why the fuck did you do that?”

“It was an accident.”

No one believed her. They all seemed to be waiting for Titus’ reaction. Dolohov raised one eyebrow. For once, seeming amused. Ginny’s eyes widened in alarm.

Nera schooled her features, dragging her poisoned nails along the table with a screech. “Such a naughty little house pet. I think she needs a spanking.”

Titus stood, dragging Hermione up along with him, fury rolling off him in waves. He clutched the back of her neck hard enough that she knew she was in trouble.

“Please forgive Hermione for her ill manners,” Titus said. “She’s still learning. Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

Titus forced her away from the table, stomping his feet forward at such a fast pace she almost couldn’t keep up with him. Still a little drunk, she wobbled, but he pushed her along. Hermione chanced a glance back to see Nera giving her a subtle smirk, running her pink tongue along her upper lip to consume the wine still dripping from her face.

Nera’s expression was greedy, as if she wished to hold Hermione’s leash in her own hands.

---

“Where are you taking me?”

“Not another fucking word,” his voice resembled ice.

Close to the double doors of the ballroom, Hermione glanced sideways, her gaze connecting with Draco. Her heart stopped in surprise, lurching to her throat. He sat in a chair next to his father toward the back with his own glass of whisky, handsome with his combed hair and suit. Even occluded, she saw the dark emotions swirling in his eyes; he gripped the table as if to leap out of his seat. Before he could do anything, Titus forced her outside, away from the crowd.

The corridors slowly got sparser of people as they travelled. They went down the lift and into a network of darkened corridors without speaking. The only sound was their heavy footsteps.

She recognized the pathway now.

The offices for the DMLE were located toward the bottom levels, right above the Wizengamot courtroom. She’d been this route several times over the years, visiting with Titus. He used to bring her to the various corners as he spoke with his colleagues.

They ended at a familiar door with his name and title on the plaque. He placed his hand along the knob, and it brightened, his office charmed to open only for him.

“Get inside.” His soft push made her stumble forward into the room, still unsteady on her heels. He kept the light off, but the moonlight lit up the space from the window behind his desk.

She twisted in a fury. “Nera deserved it—”

“Of course, she did. I told you to ignore her. I was having an important conversation. If you’d been patient for a few more minutes, I would’ve given the matter my attention.”

“There’s only so much I can stand to hear—”

He grabbed her shoulders and twisted her around before she could explain further. Kicking the door shut behind him, he led her forward to his oversized desk, gently pushing her flat against the hard surface.

None of his moves had been violent, fast, or painful, but she still sucked in a gasp at his strength, heart hammering in her chest.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he whispered low. “But I am going to keep my promise.”

She tried to raise herself, but he kept his hand pressed against the nape of her neck, just hard enough to keep her chest against the wood.

Neither of them spoke while his free hand lazily traced the web of diamonds on her back and then the bare skin underneath, as if appreciating the sight and feel. Every hair along her body rose in alarm.

Or maybe it wasn't *alarm*. The shadow still teased her in torturous, circular movements, increasing the pace until she gasped. She clutched the opposite edge of the desk, anchoring herself, trying not to raise her hips with the desperate raw desire racing down her legs.

"I warned you," he whispered. "Yet you continued."

"I won't do it again."

"You won't," he agreed, and then after a beat of silence, added: "Or maybe after this, you will. I'm not sure which one I'd want more."

He pulled her up as if she were a doll, holding her back tight to his hard chest, engulfing her body with his unforgiving frame.

"For an entire year, I've been furious with you," his voice was low like a growl near her ear. "When you chose that worthless fucker over me, I didn't know if I wanted my fingers curled around your throat." He lightly clasped the front of her neck, pulse hammering against his hand. "Or if I wanted them curled inside your pretty cunt."

He crooked two fingers on his free hand near her hip. The shadow hand obeyed, entering her. She gasped with the overwhelming sensation, body tensing from an hour of teasing pressure. Her knees buckled, but he held her upright as he found a chair, once again manoeuvring her like a doll so that she straddled one of his thighs, facing him, her velvet dress puddling around her hips.

His hand tangled in her updo, pulling her head sharply back so she could stare at him. She must have looked a mess, panting in deep gasps, hair out of place, makeup smudged, eyes wild, biting her bottom lip to prevent sounds. One dress strap slid off her shoulder and neither of them bothered to fix it.

His eyes trailed over her slowly, and he gave a deep hum of appreciation. "I want to see you break apart in my hands."

She shook her head, trembling from repressing the sensations.

"I'll keep you here until you do. This can continue for as long as you want."

The shadow fingers filled her so completely, somehow stretching her, still lightly buzzing against her clit. All it took was a gentle crook of a finger from Titus, the shadow curling like a finger inside her, and her hips moved on their own, seeking release—needing it.

A moan slipped past her lips against her will.

"That's it," he whispered, blue eyes piercing into hers. "Don't stop, and I won't."

He moved his fingers, so that the shadow hand thrust in and out unexpectedly. Hermione rolled her eyes back, mind blanking. Every nerve in her body betrayed her.

"I can't handle any more." It was too much. It almost hurt.

He grinned, a flash of white teeth in the dark. "You'll handle whatever I give you."

Hermione lost herself, no longer fighting it, rocking her hips against his thigh, moaning with each thrust of the shadow until her body tightened, back arching further with a cry. Titus forced her gaze to stay on his, his stare hungry as she shattered.

After the burst of pleasure, she collapsed forward, completely limp. Titus pulled her into a hug, his fingers still tracing the diamonds on her back.

"You did so well," he praised, holding her tighter.

The shadow dissipated with her release, and her pleasure vanished with it, bringing clarity. Her body trembled, nerves still raw. Normally, orgasms left her with a lingering high. A sense of everything right in the world. But this one made her feel sticky and wrong.

How could she have let herself enjoy that?

The ill feeling rose higher in her throat.

"I have to go to the loo." She sat up straight, scrambling off him, wobbling on her heels. It must have surprised Titus, because he let her go.

"Are you okay—"

He had the fucking audacity to look concerned.

"I have to go now," she cut him off. Panic overwhelmed her, the type that wanted to drag her under. Black spots marred her vision.

Titus' brows furrowed, touching the velvet covering her stomach. "I'll go with you."

---

They left the cool of the DMLE offices. Since the bathrooms on the lower levels were locked for the night with their lights off, they went up the lift, returning to the corridors near the ballroom.

"Right here," he said, showing her the loo. "I'll wait outside."

Hermione shoved past him and barreled through the door. It swung shut behind her. Several stalls lined one side, along with a long row of pedestal sinks.

Throwing herself into a random stall, she locked it behind her as if to block out the world. Self-hatred boiled up as she shivered beside the toilet.

After a time, her nerves settled and she groaned, exiting the stall. Going to the sink, she splashed her face with water, thankful for the shock of it. She leaned down, pressing her forehead against the cold to anchor herself in space.

"Oh, you poor little doll," a voice said behind her.



Hermione let herself rest for a second longer before raising her head to find the muggle woman—the whore—standing right behind her, giving her a fake sympathetic look in the mirror. Like the other dancers, she wore a tight purple dress that glittered with dangling beads of fringe which swished with every step, drawing attention to her hips. Her hair had been transformed into a shocking purple that matched her dress.

“What’s wrong?” The woman began washing her hands beside her, still staring at her in the mirror. “Are you sad that you have to be a whore now too?”

“Go away.” It was meant to come out harsh, but Hermione felt too unstable to add any vitriol.

The woman laughed and reached for a metal box on the wall which had a charm that magically dried her hands. “I never got to ride the Butcher’s cock, but I’ve heard he knows how to use it. From my perspective, there’s not much for you to bitch about. At the very least, you’ll get to orgasm. That’s more than most women get.”

Hermione clenched her hands at her side. The woman raised a well-manicured eyebrow. Tears pricked at Hermione’s eyes—angry ones. “I’m *not* a whore.”

“Oh, you are,” the woman seemed amused. “Whether that’s selling your body or your heart. You don’t have much choice. You’ve been raised to be one your whole life. You just didn’t realise it.”

Hermione despised the woman in front of her—or maybe she just despised herself. She wanted revenge, but she couldn’t even command her own body to do as she wished. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“Hate you?” The woman looked taken aback. “I don’t hate you, doll. You’re mistaking hatred for truth, and the truth isn’t kind. It’s merciless, but—” she paused as if examining her for something. “You can manipulate the truth. Living in a lie will not serve you.”

The woman reached for her, and Hermione flinched backward, but she grabbed her chin. “Your lipstick is a little smudged. Let me fix it.”

Hermione decided to hear what the woman wished to tell her, even if it hurt.

A painted fingernail swiped along her lip line, sharp as a blade. “There now. You’re as perfect as the doll you were always meant to be.” She didn’t drop her hands, but fixed a stray hair, patting it down. “Do you want to know another truth?”

“I’m not sure.”

How many more wounds could she stomach?

The woman pulled up the delicate strap of her dress, bringing it back into place, letting her finger linger. “There’s not a single woman in that room that wanted to be in their position either. You’re not special.”

Her words felt like a slap.

Of course she wasn't.

But, if she was honest with herself, maybe a part of her believed she didn't deserve her fate.

"I can recognize that others suffer without wanting to suffer myself," Hermione said, struggling to put her complicated emotions into words.

"Everyone has to deal with the cards they've been given, and pretending it's something that it's not only does you a disservice. You, especially, need to be very careful with how you use them. The Butcher's already playing his hand intentionally, and he'll steal everything right out from under your nose if you're not careful."

"This is my life. It's not a game."

"Of course it's a game." The woman gave a harsh scoff. "Everything's a game. And you're either playing it, or you're *being* played. The only autonomy you'll ever obtain in that ballroom full of snakes is when you stop feeling sorry for yourself and start taking control of your movements on the board. Each situation is unique and needs to be approached in various ways. Many of the women I've mentored have come to me to improve their situations and gain power where they think they have none. I helped them, and I can help you too... if you want."

Hermione crossed her arms along her chest, as if to protect her heart. She always liked to be honest, finding it hard to lie. A little trickery here or there, but she'd never bothered to hide her emotions.

Hermione wondered if she could trust her, but what could she lose? Right now, she just wished to bite back. "As you admit, you're just a whore. How could you help me at all?"

"No, my dear, I'm the *madam* of whores. I know every filthy secret in this corrupted place, words spilled foolishly across the pillow. And I'm only in this position because I know how to provide people with an illusion. I look at a person, strip them of their ornaments, and examine the dark desires underneath—the pain, the longing, the fear, the shame. The Death Eaters are just humans under the costumes. Emotional, lonely creatures, easily led by fantasy. Give a man his darkest wish, and you'll wrap your strings around his mind to guide him where you want."

"If you're so good at it, then examine me," Hermione sneered, unable to hide the bitter tones in her voice. "Strip me of *my* ornaments."

A silence lingered as the woman studied her as sharply as Titus and Draco did. The intensity increased, until she almost shifted under the scrutiny.

"You're simple to figure out, because you're not quiet enough." She raised her eyebrow again as if she dared Hermione to contradict her. "You want freedom. Of choices. Of body. Of heart. Your defiance is a pitiful expression of unrealized ambition. You believe if you crash into the wall just a bit harder, that it will come down by sheer willpower. However, in the process of slamming against the cage to be freed, you're not only injuring yourself, but angering everyone around you for destroying such a useful barrier. In response, Titus will

tighten his fist around you until you burst. And through it all, the stupid little doll is forgetting that there's a door right beside her that can be opened without any effort."

Hermione felt herself go slack in shock. She'd never had someone lay her bare like that—how she drank the bitter potion of grief and anger every day, battling everything around her in a rage, desperate for something more in her life. She wondered how the woman knew so much about her situation.

There might be truth to what she'd been told, but she didn't like where the conversation was heading.

"What you're insinuating isn't very hard to uncover. You think I can manipulate Titus, probably through physical methods."

"What you could do with that man—" The woman burst out laughing so hard, she bent at the waist. Hermione stewed in silence, cheeks burning, until she straightened, wiping at her eyes. "The position you're in— do you know how many people would kill to be in it? How many have tried and failed to get right into the heart of control." She clicked her tongue. "Titus Nott walls himself off to a severe degree, because he knows everyone wants the power he holds, and would *kill* to get it. The higher on the pyramid he gets, the less he can trust those around him. He's discovered far too late that it's unbearably lonely at the top. No friends. No lovers. It's why he wants *you*, the only woman he let past his defences. The only woman he wants to trust." She curled her lip in a mocking sneer. "And you're squandering your own potential because you want to be *sad*."

It was clear what the woman thought of her.

"You may be okay with your position, but I refuse to sleep with him to attain a goal."

"Fucking him would be the course I'd suggest for most muggleborns." The woman stepped in front of her, blocking her exit. "But lucky for you, your sweet little cunt isn't what the Butcher's really after."

It surprised Hermione so much she stayed in place, giving up her quick exit.

"I think you've read him wrong. Why else would Titus have gone through so much to get me back if not to bed me?"

"Oh, he wants to bed you. Don't misunderstand me. But the path you're on is your personal train wreck." The woman cocked her head. "Let's say you continue with your current defiance. You refuse both your body and your love, only feeding him malice and contempt. One day, he grows impatient and desperate for *anything* from you. Knowing he can't force your heart, he'll use your body to get what he wants. His intention will be to make you feel *so* good, that you'll rely on him for your physical needs, and then *maybe* you'd soften into his arms. If you want to stop the evolution of this story, you'll need to turn the page."

An image of the shadow hand going slowly up her thigh illuminated her thoughts. She blinked a few times, digesting the truth. The woman was right. This was the path they were on. She could see the fast evolution of his seduction, growing stronger with her opposition.

Hermione swallowed the part of herself that wanted to rage until she burned out, knowing the woman saw things in a way that she didn't. "What should I do?"

"Well, for one, you'll deny any physical advances, but not in an aggressive way. Pretend to be hesitant. Pretend to be nervous. Make him believe you're conflicted, but that you're considering it, if he just gave you more time."

"I thought you just said I shouldn't deny him."

The woman looked exasperated. "It's about the suggestion, not the deliverance of it. Now, if a man had other desires, I'd recommend a different course. But with the Butcher, you'll want to reel him in just enough and then let the line slacken." Her eyes sparkled with amusement. "Because what he really wants is your black little heart."

When she thought about it, she'd already known that. He wanted her to love him like she did before, and possibly even more than before. He wanted her to pretend to be his wife, playing house. Kiss him at the floor. Wish him a good day. Tell him to be safe. And when he arrived home after a strenuous day of murder and torture, she'd be there as his comfort and company.

She knew what Titus wanted, but the thought of giving him even a smile made her stomach turn. Not when he'd ripped her from happiness and shredded her memories on a whim.

The woman tapped a finger on her breastbone, just above her heart. "Make him believe he's getting close to this, and he'll sacrifice physical desires for now, along with granting you favours. It won't last forever, and it's a delicate balance. It needs to be as genuine and slow as possible. Hand out your new affections like pieces of candy, preferably after he's given you something you want, and you'll have him panting at your feet for more. Start with as simple a gesture as possible: half a grin, a look. And then perhaps graduate to a touch on his shoulder, an embrace, holding hands. Breadcrumbs of affection, leading him on the path you want. Never give him everything."

"And then I can make him hold out on sex?"

"Forever? No. All time runs out, especially with the rules in place. You'll need to prepare yourself to bed him eventually." Her smile turned sly. "Unless you plan on *escaping*."

Hermione froze. She couldn't imagine her future at the manor, just waiting for the curse to break with the purebloods somehow remaining in power. Or worse, the boundary snapping.

Of course, she wanted to escape.

Intuition prickled the back of her neck. This time, Hermione studied the woman closer, trying to slip past the colourful visage.

"And if I do want that?"

The woman reached in her purse and pulled out a tube of lipstick, turning to the mirror, swiping a few times, pressing her lips together and releasing with a pop.

“Then I’d tell you that if you can provide enough secrets to the madam of whores, then perhaps she’ll arrange for the dog to retrieve you.”

Though parts of the statement confused her, the puzzle pieces still slid together, remembering Lily’s words. Hermione’s spine snapped straight in surprise with understanding.

“You’re the—”

“You can call me Angel.”

The Order informant— it had been Titus’ muggle whore the whole time. Her heart sped up, beating so hard she felt it in her fingertips.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Find something useful. Anything you think has merit. Use what I told you to distract him from your goals.”

Hermione recognized the danger, and maybe the impossibility of the objective. Titus didn’t trust her enough to spill any information... besides the spy ear under his desk.

Hermione glanced up with a sharp grin. “I already have something. Titus knows there’s a base in Bristol. He’s waiting to gain entrance. I’d recommend evacuation.”

Angel blinked a few times and then gave her a sharp grin in return. “Perhaps you’re not so foolish after all.”

“Can you help me escape now?”

“Not yet.”

“But I gave you information.” How much more did she have to sacrifice?

“We all have our parts to play. Secreting you out from under the Butcher’s nose would be complicated, risky, and time consuming. At the moment, you’re most useful where you are.”

“I only have around four months or so until he ties himself to me, probably permanently.”

“Then there’s no time to waste.” Angel’s expression didn’t show any sympathy. “If you give us enough leads in those four months, then I will organise an escape.”

Hermione didn’t trust the woman, but she also didn’t have many options.

“Who will I tell if I discover something useful? I’ll need a reliable contact.”

“That’s the easy part. Someone you have contact with already has offered their services. Quite persuasively, I must say. When I exit this room, I’ll arrange for the Butcher to be distracted for seven minutes. Not a second more. Stay in place and the contact will let themselves be known.”

Angel gave a little wave of her fingers and began to walk out of the room. The fringe on her skirt shivered and glittered under the light. “One more word of advice,” she said before exiting. “The easiest and fastest way to manipulate a person is to appeal to their childhood. We are only walking wounds from our youth, leashed to our first pains. Tell me— who was the Butcher as a boy. What did he long for? What hurt him the most? What did he never receive? Once you know the answers, then you’ll know exactly where to begin.”

The answers to the questions arrived easily, having known Titus for most of his life.

She thought of a plan as she watched the woman disappear from the bathroom, waiting patiently for her contact.

What Angel didn’t know was that, yes, she planned to escape.

But she also planned to take everything down along with her.

---

Shortly after Angel left, a deep voice echoed in the corner. “Granger.”

She whipped her head around to see Draco leaning against the wall toward her left, arms crossed along his chest.

“How did you get in here?”

Had he heard their whole conversation, or had he just arrived?

“There are secret passages all over the ministry. Another useful Black secret. My father thinks he tracked me home.” His voice was deceptively neutral, occluding so hard she couldn’t read his emotions. He paced forward until he towered over her. “Where did Titus bring you?”

Hermione’s words caught in her throat at first. “His office.”

“Did he touch you?”

“Not exactly,” she admitted, cheeks burning in shame. “But he— he made me—”

Draco grabbed her chin, staring at her as if to glean the truth, and then tugged her toward him with a searing kiss. She groaned with the feeling. With a quick turn, he pressed her to the nearest stall door, his free hand gathering the velvet up along her thigh.

“I can’t stand it,” his voice was ice. “His hands on you. His lips. The thought of him—” he gave a low growl of frustration. “I’m going to replace every single touch with my own.”

“I didn’t want—”

“I know.” He left no room for explanation or apology, shoving her dress up to her waist. The diamonds dug into her back as he took off her knickers and lifted her legs around his hips. “It’s not your fault, but I *need* to fuck you.”

“Someone might come inside,” she warned. “We only have seven minutes.”

“I don’t fucking care.”

Hermione should have stopped him because of the danger, but she only fumbled with his trousers, unbuttoning and helping him out. She needed this as much as him, desperate for it, thrilled with the thought that Titus stood just outside. Grabbing his cock, she lined it up against her, still grasping his firm length as he slid inside. They both gasped when fully connected, and he rested his head on her shoulder.

“I want you to make it hurt,” she begged. “Don’t be gentle right now.”

On command, he sharply thrust inside her. It ached with the rough handling, but she needed him to reclaim her, wanting to feel it long after he’d left. He whispered demands for her to follow, sharp heels on his arse, nails in his shoulder, as he branded her with his fingers digging into her hips, teeth skimming her shoulder.

She welcomed the quick, intense orgasm that rocked through her several minutes later, so different from the last one, and he silenced her cries with his lips as he finished inside her. After their desperation had cooled, he kissed her neck tenderly as she sucked back her tears, arms wrapped around his shoulders in an embrace.

“You’re with the Order?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Sirius won’t formally allow me in unless I prove my loyalty. I’m still the son of Lucius Malfoy— but they’ve allowed me to be your contact.”

She hated it, but she understood Sirius’ reasoning, even if it seemed harsh.

“I’m not sure how long I can stop Titus,” she said her fear out loud.

“You have more power than you think,” he answered, lifting his head to give a sly smirk—the one he gave when he outthought someone. “He can’t get what he really wants. Not without your permission.”

“What do you mean?” They separated, and she slid out of his hold, feeling their shared desire run down her inner thighs. A thought came to her then. Something that hadn’t before. “Does this have to do with the vow at the Trial?”

“No.” He dragged his wand along her collarbone, getting rid of the marks he’d left against her skin, looking pained to do so. “The vow hinges on intention. He might have said he wouldn’t change your decision, but his thoughts would have kept it locked to the Trial.”

She knew there must have been a loophole. Titus wouldn’t have taken a vow forcing him into a route he didn’t want to go.

“Then what power do I have?”

“He can’t get you pregnant.”

She blinked a few times, confused. “Not yet, but your father said he’d give him the instructions to lift the binding.”

“My father’s already given them.” Draco placed his wand toward the center of her legs, cleaning the remnants of their sex, though a pleasant ache remained. “A potion, given under a full moon, would be the first step.” He fixed her makeup, brushing an errant hair behind her ear. “Have you felt ill? A fever?”

She remembered Titus’ concern about her being under the weather. “Why is everyone so concerned that I might be ill?”

“Because he’s been drugging your drinks with potions to start lifting the binding. I know this, because Snape has been brewing them for him. If it works, the side effects are a day or so of fever and illness.”

Hermione paused, feeling chilled at the revelation, understanding Titus’ “concern” now.

“But I haven’t been ill.”

“And you won’t get ill.” He gently placed his hands along her jaw, whispering against her lips. “Because I didn’t use the Malfoy binding spell.”

“What?” she reared back, searching his eyes. His occlumency dropped, shifting his eyes into a disconcerting crimson.

“I’d planned it since the day at the meadow. After researching binding spells, all that was needed was a little change of wording to the original.”

“I don’t understand.” Her heart began to race.

He placed a kiss on her lips, then her cheeks, and then her forehead. “You’re in control. You have been since the beginning with me.”

“Are you saying—”

“He can’t take the binding off without your verbal permission. And even if I wanted you pregnant, I couldn’t do so without you wanting it too.”

Hermione froze in shock. “But you gave me contraceptive potions?”

“I needed to keep up appearances, especially with my father.” He grimaced. “Mipsy is bound to him as head of household and would be compelled to tell him everything if he investigated. He’d forgive a contraceptive potion. He wouldn’t forgive what I did.”

Hermione placed a hand behind her to steady herself as the enormity of what he told her sunk into her mind. A weight lifted off her shoulders. A deep fear.

It was more than a choice. He’d given her complete ownership of her fertility. She’d never have to get pregnant unless she wished for it.



Her heart sank and rose at once, fingers trembling from emotion.

She lunged at him, lips attaching to his with a groan, wishing she didn't have to let go. The intense sensation inside her bloomed along every cell in her body, basking in bliss. She didn't realise tears dripped down her cheeks until he wiped them away gently.

Out of all the things he'd gifted her, this might be the most earth shattering.

*I love you*, she wished to say— because that was the feeling hammering inside her chest. It was more than what he'd given her. It was everything about him.

But she couldn't state it out loud. Not yet. Not with her heart so close to breaking. If she did, she feared everything she loved would be stripped from her, and she wouldn't survive it.

“Listen to me, Granger,” he said, tilting her head up by her chin. “Nott won't be fooled for long. He's already questioning why it isn't working. And when he does discover that the choice rests in your hands— he'll do everything in his power to take it from you. Whatever you do, don't allow this.”

She took the warning to heart.

“I won't,” she promised.

---

It took great effort to say goodbye to Draco. She watched as he disappeared in a surprising hidden tunnel that opened on a far wall after a pattern of knocks.

Everything inside her wanted to follow Draco through the tunnel. Only the tracker concealed on her throat stopped her.

When she exited the bathroom, making sure she looked refreshed, she found Titus with his hands in his pockets a little further down the corridor, talking to a short, balding man. She could tell he was annoyed by the person.

Titus turned in time to see her, and his stance changed, loosening. He bid the other person goodbye with a sharp dismissal, and when she walked within his grasp, he inspected her slowly.

"You took a long time."

"I wasn't feeling so well."

He tilted his head. “Do you still feel ill?”

“No, I'm better now. It might have been the wine.”

Titus gave a nod and didn't interrogate her further. After extending his arm, she placed her hand on top of his, allowing him to lead her back to the ballroom. Her mind clouded until they entered the packed crowds. Many of the couples were already twirling to the music.

“Do you want to dance?” he asked.

“I thought you'd make me apologise.”

“To Nera?” He gave a hard laugh. “You don't have to say a single word to that bitch.”

Unwilling to risk ruining the forward motion of her plans, she let him lead her to the dance floor without a fight. When he began to twirl her, she moved with the rotations, discovering that Titus still danced as gracefully as he duelled.

“I realise now that I pushed you too hard today,” he said during the middle of the song without meeting her eyes. “I thought you—I should have known it would be too much, given your state of mind lately. I take responsibility for all of it.”

A thousand snarky comments almost burst out, but she kept them down, determined to begin controlling her situation.

“It's hard for me not to respond when Nera mentions Julie,” she finally said, deflecting from guilt and blame. “I miss her, and I— I'm tired of being sad.”

“I know you are.” He stopped dancing, reaching up to cradle her cheek. “Let me fix what's broken between us. Allow me to bring you happiness again.”

She glanced up through her lashes, deciding any enthusiasm would be suspicious. “Can we go home?”

Home— she said the word on purpose, knowing it would please him.

After delivering her first stroke of manipulation, she waited for his response, trying her best to keep her expressions neutral.

He paused for a moment, searching her face, picking her apart. She thought she might have moved too fast with her plans, but his shoulders relaxed.

“Of course.” His dimples appeared with his grin, as if he thought he'd won a small battle. “You must be exhausted. Let's go home.”

As he led her out, she reviewed what she'd just done. A single word while looking up through her lashes— that was all it took to get what she wanted. Hermione hid a secret smile, knowing exactly what she needed to do going forward.

Angel was right. She wouldn't get her revenge with aggression alone, slamming against her cage to break it. She needed to behave more subtly, like the Slytherins around her. Each move premeditated, luring her prey in with a smile, even if it went against her nature.

As everyone kept telling Hermione, she remained the Butcher's only weakness.

And it was long past time that she started acting like it.

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Dubious consent (possibly extreme dubious consent) and discussion of abortion

On veritaserum: there are a lot of inconsistencies with canon lore about the rules/ use of the potion. So honestly, though it won't be too far off canon, I'm fixing it to fit with the rules for magic in House Pet (limitations, loopholes, intention, etc.).

I haven't had time to figure out why some of my art keeps vanishing while some stays. I'll try to fix it this weekend!

# Chapter 49: A Crouching Lion

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion:

bülow - “Own Me”

BANKS- “Beggin for Thread”

A big thank you to MyPrivateInsanity and my alpha team for catching so many mistakes! Also, thank you to everyone for their patience waiting for this chapter while I sorted through some complicated real-life events.

Previously on House Pet:

Following a brutal execution led by Titus, Finch commits suicide, and Hermione struggles to find a reason to live in the aftermath. Ultimately, she decides to keep going for her loved ones and for revenge.

Through all of this, she discovers that Draco’s willing to mutilate his soul to get her back, and Titus believes he can win Hermione’s love again if he makes her life comfortable enough.

After being goaded into a reaction by Nera Zabini during a gala, Titus forces Hermione to orgasm in his office as punishment. She goes to the bathroom after, finding a muggle dancer named Angel, who coaches her on how to manipulate Titus to get what she ultimately wants— freedom.

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

Two weeks before Christmas, Hermione began her plan on a chilly afternoon, climbing the largest tree on the property, scraping her knees on the bark as she ascended. Out of the multitude of trees on the Nott grounds, the oak’s thick trunk, paired with strong, low branches, told her it might have been the oldest.

She used to love climbing the ancient tree as a child. Along with Theo, she’d scramble all the way to the top, enjoying the expansive view. Even though the height usually made her woozy, it never made her terrified like flying did.

Or, at least, she *used* to not be scared.

Halfway up, she started to reassess the intelligence of climbing so high, the branches creaking under her palms as she tested their weight.

Despite her stomach swooping low, she continued until reaching a limb that almost snapped, and then she decided that she'd made it high enough to make her claim believable.

Settling into the curved spot between the trunk and the branch, Hermione allowed herself a moment to enjoy the view. The leaves of most of the trees had fallen long ago, giving her an unobstructed panorama of the winter sky, grey as the concrete statues in the hedge maze. The cold beauty calmed her as she began her wait, doing her best to endure the icy wind by cupping her hands over her mouth and breathing into them.

When Bitty finally appeared at the base of the tree, the sun had fallen, touching the horizon.

"Mistress Hermione!" The little elf's ears wiggled. "Master Titus is waiting in the dining room."

"I can't go."

"But mistress—"

"It's not that I *won't* go. I really *can't*. I'm stuck up here. Will you fetch Titus to help me down?"

Bitty's eyes widened in concern. "Right away, mistress."

A few minutes later, Hermione watched as a figure flew toward her at a steady pace. The remnants of sunlight surrounded him, so she squinted, finding it hard to see until Titus hovered before her on a Firebolt.

He glanced down and then back up. "Why the fuck are you in the tree?"

"I was— don't laugh at me," she tried to glower. "I was just climbing like I used to, but I underestimated how much smaller I used to be."

His face pulled into a sudden frown. "This isn't like the pond, is it?"

"If I wanted to kill myself, flinging myself from great heights wouldn't be my method of choice. Don't you know me at all?"

"Yes, I do know you— which leads me back to my original question about why you're up here."

"Because I was bloody bored like always!" She crossed her arms, and then quickly grabbed on the branch again after wobbling. "I wanted to see the sunset. I thought it might be worth it, but I was clearly wrong."

Titus let out a low breath and grinned, shoulders relaxing.

"Have you tried climbing down?"

She sneered at him. "Of course, I've tried climbing down, but the branch above me snapped, and now I don't think I can trust the others."

"Come here." He held out his hand for her to take.

"I don't trust your broom either."

"I'd never drop you."

"Accidents happen."

"You only have three options. You can trust me, you can climb down, or you can stay in the tree."

She'd manufactured the circumstances, but she already regretted the three choices, because they all left her with dread.

"Alright. But one surprise flip, and I'll shove you off your broom."

He gave a soft laugh, and when she reached out a shaky hand, he tugged her onto the Firebolt in front of him in one smooth movement, snaking a hand around her waist to secure her.

"After today, I'll hire a goblin to place permanent cushioning charms under the trees, so you can climb without worry. Knowing your propensity for jumping into dangerous situations, I should have done it years ago."

She shivered and gripped the handle hard. "Just get me to solid ground."

He tugged her closer, and she felt the muscles in his chest press to her back, while his lips rested near her ear. "Would you still like to see the sunset?"

She wanted to land but playing into his delusions was what she'd planned in the first place. "Only for a little bit."

His lips twitched near her neck as they flew higher and hovered in the air, watching the sun descend, painting the once grey sky a muted orange.

"I've missed this," he broke the silence. "No fighting. No anger. Just enjoying each other's company."

A broken part of her missed it too, grieving the ruined image of her childhood hero. It hurt to hate him; she wished more than anything that she could be merely indifferent.

She took a slow breath before beginning the second part of the plan. "I've been thinking—"

"Overthinking, you mean."

She pinched the arm cinched around her waist, and he laughed again.

"Go on," he urged.

"I've just been thinking about everything that's happened between us, attempting to see it from your perspective." She allowed herself a pause. "I'm still angry with you. You ripped out a memory—"

"In any other circumstance, I'd never have done that, but I had no other way to protect you. The look you gave me afterward will haunt me forever. I'm not sure how to make it up to you, but I plan to."

He lied so well, but she'd gotten better at seeing through them. Maybe he felt guilty it hurt her, but he didn't regret doing it. As he said before, if he could shred every memory of Draco without injuring her brain, he would have.

"I'm angry," she continued, unwilling to respond to his semi-apology. "But I also understand I didn't give you many options, and I know you did everything possible to save me—"

"I'd never let anyone hurt you," he interrupted her again with another lie. "Since we're in a sharing mood, I've decided to forgive you too."

"Forgive *me*?" She tensed, unable to keep the acid from her tone.

"You chose someone else over me, and then gave him everything that he didn't deserve." The arm along her waist tightened into something intimate. "You willingly let him *fuck* you."

"As if you were some pure virgin before this." She seethed with fury, wishing to wrap her fingers around his hypocritical neck. "I wouldn't be surprised if you've slept with every available witch in the country by this point. Not to mention the woman who you polyjuice—"

"The difference is that I—" He huffed with exasperation, as if caught off guard. "You're right. We both have reasons to be angry and jealous. Dwelling on what we've done before this is useless. Maybe we should try and see this as a blank slate."

Jealous! The nerve of him to think she was *jealous* of Angel kneeling before him in her body. She curled her hand around the broom tighter to contain her reply, knowing it was smarter to let him believe what he wished.

"What I find harder to forgive is you going to the Order. They killed my parents, and you—" he drummed his fingers along her hip. "In the end, I blame myself. I should've seen the signs when you came to dinner, asking about Julie. Your desperation made you susceptible to their manipulations. Your love made you reckless."

She closed her eyes, memories of her friends just out of reach. The grief of losing Finch always resurfaced at the oddest times, stabbing her in the chest, taking the air from her lungs. Did Julie even know? It made her ill to think about telling her.

"I thought it was the only way to help her."

"I know, but it was the wrong course," he said gently. "I wish you would've taken my offer. Next time, you need to trust me with your problems from the beginning."

Holding her tongue proved difficult. The only reason he offered anything in the first place was because he desired to seduce her before stealing her back from Draco. He could have helped Julie all along. Instead, he made it transactional. Any attempt to work with him would require a sacrifice.

She would never regret helping Julie, even if it had landed her in hot water.

Though she tried to blink them back, several tears slid down her cheeks. Titus noticed and released her waist to brush them away with his thumb.

“Don’t cry. I know you miss your friends and are feeling unmoored. Now that we’re beginning to put our hurt and anger behind us, we’ll find our way forward together.”

A month ago, Hermione would have informed him that her tears weren’t from grief alone. They burned her skin as they dripped poison from her soul, acid with rage over everything she’d lost.

Instead, she let him wipe away her tears, keeping her eyes on the horizon, plotting her next move.

"Let's go eat," he said once she'd bottled up her grief again. "And after that, maybe we can read by the fire in the living room."

She agreed with a nod, not opposed to losing herself in a book or two. Before flying down, she touched the arm that held her. "Thank you for getting me out of the tree without laughing at me."

"Did you think I'd let you stay there all night?"

"No," she said, choosing her words carefully. "I know you'll always help me in the end."

His body tightened behind her as he sat up straighter. "It means a lot to me that you know that."

As they flew back down, her expression locked into neutrality as she practised putting away her true emotions in little boxes on her still-shattered bookshelves, remembering Draco's lessons on occlumency and Angel's advice.

*Tell me— who was the Butcher as a boy? What did he long for? What hurt him the most? What did he never receive?*

In the end, Titus wanted nothing more than to be a dragon knight, saving fair maidens from a monster— or, perhaps, simply saving a fair maiden from breaking her neck while climbing down a tree.

*You're his bird, Hermione.*

If Titus wanted to pretend to be her hero, then she'd let him be her bloody hero.

---



The next day Hermione hovered outside the door to his study, hesitating to open it. When she gathered the courage to step inside, she found Titus in his usual spot, with his desk clear of clutter except for an ink pot and a stack of parchment. He clutched a brilliant blue quill that matched his eyes as he wrote in perfunctory strokes, furrowing his brow in concentration.

His quill paused with her entrance, but he didn't look away from his task as she made her way to her chair.

"What do you want?" His tone sounded weary.

"I was—" she thought of what he'd want to hear. "Could I sit in here while you work?"

He finally glanced up, eyes brightened by the light. "Of course, you can. My spaces are always welcome to you."

Only the benign spaces. He kept all of his potions and serious documents locked away, and she couldn't access seventy-five percent of the books in the manor— not to mention all of the heirlooms with repellant charms. He'd warded the ponds, and she realised yesterday that she could only climb the tree halfway now before she met resistance.

Once again, his protection was suffocating. Possibly even more than before the Trial. Titus' grasp kept squeezing tighter, and she had to find a way to convince him to loosen it enough to allow her to breathe.

Hermione needed his trust first. Incremental, *believable* changes. And the only way forward was to play the game Angel outlined for her, indulging his emotional fantasies.

While he scratched away at his parchment, Hermione curled in her chair, pretending to read a book while ordering the potential future conversations in her mind, outlining her goals. She did this until he rolled up the last scroll and put away his quill and inkpot.

"Come here," he ordered.

Hermione pretended to be annoyed at the interruption. Though she hadn't truly been reading, she saved her place with a ribbon and followed his instructions, feeling more wary with each step toward him.

Flashbacks of Angel on her knees invaded her mind, her curves visible through the thin bathing costume, eyes widened. How her lips looked wrapped around him.

Did he think of it too?

Hermione repressed her revulsion and the involuntary arousal at the thought. She comforted herself that it didn't mean anything, just a natural response from her body from lack of touch and human contact, a feeling adjacent to fear, so intertwined she couldn't tear them apart. A jumble of confused sensations which stemmed from being forced to orgasm in his lap just a week before.

As she approached, he reached out, grasping her by the hips and pulling her in front of him, guiding her to sit on the desk. As soon as she was settled, he rolled his chair close, leaned forward, and rested his elbows on either side of her, fingers clasped together on her lap, looking up at her through his dark lashes. He seemed to be in a good mood, grinning enough that his dimples appeared, making him seem far more innocent than he was.

"You're lonely," he said simply. "Or you'd never be desperate enough to come into this room."

Why deny the claim? Hermione nodded, and he sighed.

"I contacted Goyle, and he said he can bring their new ward around soon. From what I've been told, she seems harmless enough."

Luna—Hermione felt conflicted about seeing her. What would they even talk about?

"I suppose it would be nice to have a conversation with someone other than Herbert."

"Herbert?"

"The suit of armour in the foyer. I named him." She blinked. "That's a bit sad, isn't it?"

"Only because he can't talk back."

"He likes his name though."

"Does he?" Titus touched the edge of her skirt, rolling the fabric between his finger and thumb. She refused to react visibly to it, though something curled in her stomach—whether that was trepidation or another spike of unwanted arousal didn't matter, and she didn't care to investigate it. She bit her bottom lip on purpose so that she looked hesitant, and he raised his eyebrows. "You want something else."

She blew out a hard breath. "I need more than a single potential friend, and I need something else to do."

He lost his smile. "We've been through this—"

"I won't be asking for anything more than what you've already offered." Hermione decided to see if he'd take the bait. "I want to work. A job. In the ministry... working with you."

"A job?" His brows furrowed again.

"Something to challenge my mind."

He tilted his head, still looking up. "I could bring some work home, I suppose."

"No," she said much too harshly and then, realising her mistake, softened her voice. "No, I need a change of location. You promised."

"I never promised; I only offered. And that was only to get you out of that blasted apothecary and closer to me."

*Breadcrumbs of affection.*

Hermione touched the top of his hand, and his eyes snapped down to the point of contact. "Please," she said in that softer voice, forcing her eyes to widen. "It would make me happy to be useful."

"Useful? You're—" He stopped and glanced away in thought. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to bring you to the ministry. It's far safer than anywhere else. I'm only hesitant because—"

"You can trust me," she interjected and then bit her tongue, knowing she'd pushed it too far.

"Can I?" He mocked with a sneer and pulled back.

"What could I even do?"

"Probably find a way to get in a great deal of trouble. I'm not so foolish, Sprite. I wouldn't give any space for disobedience. Most of the documents are hidden with a cipher that I created, among other precautions I'll implement."

That was a complication she'd need to think through.

"It's not like I could tell anyone any secrets regardless. Who do I even talk to besides potentially Luna, who is only a slave like me and possibly insane?"

"Slave?" A muscle in his jaw ticked. "Any chains you have are self-induced. I wish I could trust you like Rowle does his muggleborn, letting you roam and learn as you please. And maybe one day I will, but that will be earned."

This was going horribly. Controlling her tongue and manipulating the situation proved harder when trying to work through the fantasies in his head.

Deception didn't come naturally to her, especially when she wished to swipe his face off. But there was nothing for her to do about it, because she needed to please his over-bloated ego.

He grabbed her chin and tugged it toward him. "Don't be cross with me when I'm considering breaking traditions for you in the first place." He ran his thumb along her lower lip. "This manor is only a prison because you make it that way in your mind. Tell me what I need to do to help you see I'm not your enemy."

"Give me a job, and I'll let you—" she withheld a grimace. "I'll let you court me."

He considered her proposition. "I'll agree, but only if you give me a real chance. Allow me to bring you on dates. Let me show you how it feels to be a Nott wife."

Honestly, she'd rather be seen as his muggleborn whore than as his wife, but she needed something to do, and it served multiple purposes— including seeing how far she could push him.

“Deal.”

His gaze softened, as if he thought the tradeoff was romantic.

And then his gaze softened too much.

"Can I do magic?" she interrupted him before he could lean closer and ruin everything. "Not by myself. Just— it hurts not to use it, like a sickness in my blood. I'm not trying to trick you. One time. Right here. I couldn't beat you in a fight anyway, and I don't have a wand."

He didn't seem to like the idea, but after a moment, he dug in his cloak, pulling out his wand and the universal key of Draco's he'd stolen from her in the ministry.

"Only a few tricks. Something simple like a lumos. Consider this my gift of trust, which I hope you'll extend to me in turn. If you don't try anything violent, I'll think about letting you out of your shackles for a few minutes a day under supervision."

Pitifully excited, she held out her wrists as he unsnapped her shackles.

The tingle of magic twisted painfully as it returned. The months at Nott Manor had been the longest she'd ever experienced without magic, and it bubbled up inside her like a fountain, rushing down her limbs.

"Lumos," she whispered with a gasp as the ball of light erupted between them. She wished to shout and dance and celebrate with the sensation zipping through her, just as she had as a child, overwhelmed with all it represented— what belonged to her. What had been taken.

Titus kept a wary eye on her, but his expression stayed soft, watching her unfiltered joy, as she went through a set of basic spells.

"That's enough for now," he said after a few minutes. She groaned, dreading the feel of shackles on her wrists again.

"At what point would you trust me enough to leave them off for longer?"

"I'm not sure yet. I suppose I'll know when it's time. Though I also might consider it when you're pregnant. I'm not sure what the side effects of magical suppression could be to our baby. It's not been studied yet. If you haven't settled by then, I might have to resort to other methods to control your misbehaviour."

Other methods? How much worse could it get? And could he truly be so cruel? Her stomach tightened with fear at the thought of the potential future, where he could shrink her cage on a whim.

Titus seemed to notice her sudden coldness, though she tried to hide it. He tapped her chin again. "Let's not ruminate on things that haven't happened. Is there anything else you want?"

She weighed whether to ask it. It would probably be smarter to wait, but she had to risk something while he remained in a giving mood.

"I'd like to be allowed trips to Diagon Alley."

Sending notes through a bag wouldn't suffice. She *needed* to see Draco. Touch him. Kiss him.

Titus gently tugged on one of her curls. "When I'm home, I'll bring you. Perhaps as a first date."

That was absolutely the last thing she wanted.

"But you're always working. I'd like to go more than once a month."

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not letting you roam Diagon Alley by yourself, if that's what you're implying."

"Not by myself, of course. Supervised by Theo or an auror. It could just be a couple of times a week."

She gathered his hand in hers. It seemed to soothe his irritation, and his thumb softly brushed along her finger. He stared at their point of contact, biting his cheek in thought.

"I could spare an auror every other week. Rowle, most likely, since he's the most competent and trustworthy on my team right now."

"Once a week."

"Always bargaining." He lifted the hand that she held and gave a gentle kiss to the top of her knuckles. "I concede defeat for now, my love. Once a week it is, unless we're too busy. Consider this my second act of trust. Don't make me regret it."

Without thought, she leaned forward and brushed his cheek with a kiss like she used to do. "Thank you."

He froze and touched the spot where her lips met his skin. "How could I say no when you plead so sweetly?"

---

For her first day of employment at the ministry, Hermione braided her hair in her old style and wore a conservative dress. She didn't want Titus to find any fault in her dress or behaviour to prevent her from going.

The auror offices were located in the lower levels, near the courtroom and the cells. Neither of these things dampened her mood as she made her way through the cold corridors with Titus' hand on her lower spine, gently guiding her forward.

"The entire floor is yours today, besides Rowle in room 68."

When she entered his office, the hair on the back of her neck raised, every cell at attention, as if her body remembered how it felt the last time she'd been inside the confines of these four

walls.

"What do you need me to do?" She roamed the room as he watched her explore, picking up some knick knacks on a bookcase and then setting them back down. A magical window stretched on the wall behind the desk, giving the illusion of an open bright space, showing a pastoral scene. She assumed the fake sun followed the real track of time.

Titus reached into a drawer, took out a stack of papers, and placed them on the desk. "These will need to be copied and then sorted into their respective files. If you find a missive from another department, just separate them and leave them on the desk so that it's easier for me to go through."

She could do that.

"Where are the files?"

"In the adjoining room."

"Perfect." Hermione clasped her hands, trying to conceal her excitement. Despite having ulterior motives, the idea of sorting and organising paperwork really appealed to her.

An ancient elf popped into the room a second later, almost scaring her. It had skin greyer than normal and wobbled against a tiny cane.

"This is Minty," Titus introduced them with a fond grin. "A ministry elf. He'll be here if you need anything."

No, Minty was there to watch her and make sure she didn't *misbehave*. Hermione couldn't be fooled. As if the elf read her thoughts, he wandered to a corner where a miniature chair had already been strategically positioned. After sitting, the elf began his task, staring without blinking.

"Anything else I need to do?" She asked, trying not to appear irritated at the elf's presence—another obstacle in her way.

"Not really. I'm sure I'll think of more tasks later."

"Who did this before me?"

"I did, but it will be nice to offload some of the work."

Of course, he had done it himself. Titus had trouble inviting anyone else into his spaces. He only allowed her to invade them because he believed he could control all of the variables with monitoring elves, obsidian shackles, limited outside contact, and encoded parchments.

Really, he didn't know her at all.

"Do you have any other questions?" Titus asked, walking closer as she sat in his comfortable office chair, finding it overly large for her frame.

"No, I think I've got it. Copy, sort, and file. Simple."

He gave an indulgent grin and leaned toward her. She made an instinctive mistake by flinching, and he paused by her cheek, only waiting a moment before repositioning and pressing his lips to the top of her head.

"I'll be back for lunch, unless something holds me up."

"Where are you going?"

He only raised an eyebrow, giving his cursory checks of armour and holsters in place, along with his extra weapons in a mirror off to the side. "Bristol."

Her blood froze at the city name, hoping the concern didn't show on her face, wondering if Angel had relayed the information she'd given her.

"What for?"

"I'd answer, but you wouldn't really want to know." He winked and walked out of the room, softly clicking the door closed behind him.

Hermione grimaced at her task, feeling like she was helping a malevolent god collect innocent souls by managing his paperwork.

---

The parchments didn't really have to be copied by hand. If she had her magic, she could have managed it with a simple spell.

Irrelevant busy work— that's what he'd given her. Something he hoped would provide mental stimulation and purpose, while simultaneously being useless.

As nearly insulting as it was, it would normally drive her spare, but she used her time wisely by studying the jumbled words of Titus's alphabetic cipher as she copied. She believed he used a simple substitution for each letter—a puzzle she hoped would be easy enough to solve with pattern recognition and enough time.

After painstakingly copying her fourth parchment, Hermione pretended to drop her quill.

"Bloody hell!" She leaned down to grab it before the elf could help. "Silly me. I'm so clumsy." On the way back up, she took a chance and slipped a shrunken magnifying glass from her pocket.

Just the night before, she'd asked Draco to send the heirloom through the enchanted bag in preparation for her task. With just a press of the glass to paper, it would retain the entire contents which could then be transferred onto a separate parchment later. At full capacity, it could capture up to a hundred scrolls of information.

Straightening in the chair, Hermione glanced at Minty before placing the quill to paper again. The elf gave a blank stare back. Unlike Bitty, who liked to chatter, Minty stayed silent with his eyes wide open, taking Titus' orders to watch her very literally.

But he didn't seem to catch her sleight of hand.

Feigning innocence, she placed the object in her palm in a way that she hoped would hide it as she continued.

---

Hermione surreptitiously scanned each parchment with the magnifier as she copied them by hand, giving special attention to the missives from other departments. It proved to be tedious work. She tried her best to study the documents but decided she didn't want to raise any suspicions. If Minty saw her lingering over them and grew leery, his concerns would be relayed to Titus, and then she might be denied access to them altogether.

Hermione hated her circumstance, but Angel managed to be right again. She'd landed in a position that the Order would kill to be in— close to the Butcher with access to his missives and files. Though she believed his top-secret information remained locked away in his desk back home, the ministry files in front of her were the equivalent of pure gold to the resistance intelligence, and she wouldn't waste the opportunity.

So Hermione worked for hours without complaint, ignoring the agony of her cramping hand and the unrelenting gaze of the elf. When she'd copied the last parchment in the stack, she almost wept with relief before setting her sights on the more exciting task— the files.

In the adjacent room, rows of metal cabinets lined the walls. She opened a few, trying to figure out the system in place before starting.

Like the rest of the parchments, the only readable words written on the header were the name of the offender or event, the type of crime, and when and where it occurred. Everything else remained encoded.

The mess of them surprised her. Titus was generally one for complete order, and while the files did contain a system, it proved nearly unusable as it was. Hermione only spared a second to remember the magnifying glass still tucked into her palm.

When the realisation came, it sparked along her skin, trailing down her spine with a zip.

Why just copy the missives that crossed his desk when she could do the same to the entire contents of the file system?

A hundred documents a day.

All she needed was a believable reason to thoroughly go through them.

Hermione grinned, rolled up her sleeves to her elbow, and opened the first file cabinet, planning to use his misplaced confidence to her advantage.

---

"What are you doing?" Titus asked, walking into the room several hours later, peeling off his



gloves. Hermione made sure to subtly slide the tiny magnifying glass into her pocket before he could notice.

With his orders finished, Minty apparated away, leaving behind his little chair.

"Organising. How did you even find anything before me?"

"My organisational system was perfect as it was."

Hermione gave a snort, refusing to play into his delusions in this instance.

She sat on the floor with twenty-six stacks of parchments encircling her. So far, she'd only made progress on a single cabinet, giving her enough time to analyse, copy, and sort many of them.

One hundred, to be exact, including the missives she'd processed earlier. She'd double counted to make sure, taking note of where she stopped.

Titus almost seemed angry, eyes taking in the chaos, and then after staring at the piles, he looked resigned. "So how do you plan to restructure?"

"Alphabetical, of course. Like it should have been in the first place."

"It works better by the type of crime and then alphabetically by name."

"In what world would that make it easier? Some of the people have multiple infractions, which means you must place the same person in multiple locations, making clerical errors more prominent. I'm not only making it alphabetical using their last names, but I'm gathering each file on the same person and making small notes when they connect to other cases, especially in instances where multiple people were involved."

She hoped the notes would help her later as well.

Titus tapped his foot, probably in agitation, and then he stopped.

"You're probably right, but let's go to lunch."

---

Hermione approached the deciphering process like her third Trial, clearing her mind to focus and count her blessings— mostly that he didn't use a scrambling charm on each parchment.

Text scrambling spells were complicated to achieve in a permanent way, usually reserved for the most important documents or books, done by a wizard specially trained in magical texts. To use it on an entire file system would be a massive undertaking, especially since many of them needed to be accessed by several ministry employees in the auror department.

It left her with a task she could potentially achieve *without* magic.

She waited for a day off to officially tackle the challenge. Sitting in the treehouse with a few copied papers from the magnifying glass scattered around her, along with several quills and ink pots, she sorted through the maze of random letters before her.

After an hour, she sat back and groaned. What she thought had been a simple alphabetical substitution cipher turned out to be slightly more difficult.

One: he omitted punctuation to eliminate boundaries. It made it difficult to know where to begin and end.

Two: she suspected some of the substitutions included two letters instead of one.

A headache formed behind her eyes. A part of her wanted to burn it all in agitation, but she refused to concede defeat so early. Tying her hair up into a bun, Hermione leaned forward again, determined to see this through.

As with any puzzle, she discarded her plan to sort through them, deciding to start smaller, looking for single words.

She discovered the letter A first.

Then I.

From there, she moved on to cracking two letter words, mapping out her guesses for the rest of the vowels and commonly used consonants, checking patterns for frequency. Going back and erasing her mistakes again and again, uncovering one letter at a time.

It took three days off from work for her to break the majority of the code. When she finally finished the alphabet, she discovered that he hadn't omitted punctuation at all, but instead used repeating letters in their place like she suspected. LL for a question mark. TT for an apostrophe. And so on.

While it might not have been the most complex system ever created— which wouldn't have been practical for the length of the files— she admired the surprising upgrades to a simple substitution cipher.

Her fingers shook in excitement when she finally translated an entire missive intended for the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes.

And it was at that point, Hermione ran into her final roadblock— most of the uncovered text made little sense, reading like gibberish. He used codespeak, she realised, hiding any sensitive information like names of cities or important people. She also suspected the text was littered with null words and phrases— possibly entire sentences— to throw off decoding.

A second fucking puzzle to solve.

And this one she might need help with.

---

The next day, Hermione sent Draco a short message through the charmed bag.

**Your father promised you an internship under Walter Filibus, correct?**

Five minutes later an answer appeared. **Don't worry. I won't be indulging any of his plans.**

Hermione worried her bottom lip deep in thought. **Would Titus ban you from the internship based on his suspicions?**

**His suspicions are his own. Nott has no proof of anything. I've made sure of that. Not to mention the position was one of the tradeoffs given to my father. Denying me what he promised would reflect badly on him.**

She didn't know if she envied Draco's confidence, or if she feared it would burn him again.

**I want you to reconsider the offer and accept it.**

**What are you planning?** he responded. She could sense the wariness in the sentence.

**I've solved half of an encrypted missive, but I'm unable to go further without insider knowledge. Based on the similar phrases sent to Filibus and other high-ranking officials, I think the upper levels of the ministry use most of the same codespeak to communicate with each other. With your connections, and my cipher, we'd have a direct line to top secret information. Just tell me what you discover, and I'll solve the rest.**

She waited in tense silence for his reply.

**I'll do this, but in exchange, I want you to let me handle it all. Don't risk anything more than you already have. Send over the documents that you copied and what you've solved so far. I'll crack the rest and relay the information to whoever you wish, along with anything else you find.**

Hermione didn't like that idea one bit. **I'm not going to just let you handle it all. I'm fully capable of doing this.**

The response shot back only a few seconds later. She could see his anger in the blotchy ink.

**You're not the only one with a brain, Granger. Send me the magnifying glass with the copied files, and what you've solved so far, or I'm going to find a way to sneak into Nott manor just to fuck some sense into you. I thought we'd already gotten past your incessant need to always be in control.**

Hermione might not be the best at manipulation, deceit, fighting, or strategizing, but she excelled at puzzles and thinking through problems. She hated feeling powerless and useless, magically caged, just waiting in a manor for people to save her. She wanted to contribute. Doing this meant doing *something*.

But Draco managed to be right, as loath as she was to admit it. Titus had already questioned why she was sequestering herself so much in the treehouse again. And though she'd made sure to hide the evidence as well as the bag, he might investigate if she continued spending all of her time hidden away.

Hermione groaned, denied the impulse in her brain that wanted to do everything herself, and placed what he'd asked for in the bag.

She winced as it vanished.

---

Hermione woke up to a kiss on her cheek. In the haze of a dream, she almost groaned Draco's name, but she caught it just in time, blinking up at Titus staring down at her fondly, brushing a curl behind her ear.

"Merry Christmas, Sprite."

"Christmas!" Hermione shoved out of his hold and hopped out of bed, bare feet padding on the floor.

She may currently hate Nott manor, but she'd need to be cold in a grave to hate the holiday season.

When she hurtled into the living room, the familiar decorations gleamed around her—the tinsel, the fake fairies, the candles glowing softly. A mess of presents, all wrapped by hand and not yet sorted, encircled the tree. As she entered, a floating violin in the corner began to play traditional music.

Hermione curled into her usual chair near the fireplace, and Bitty handed her a steaming mug of hot cocoa.

For the first time in months, she allowed herself to feel happy, determined to enjoy the day. The emotion felt like slipping on a coat that she'd forgotten, well-worn and cosy with rips in the elbows.

Titus appeared in the doorway, still in his pyjamas, though he'd put on a white shirt. He looked at her while he clutched the frame, as if he couldn't quite believe she was real.

Hermione took a sip of her drink, burning her tongue, feeling awkward and unsure what to do next.

What would he *want* her to do was the true question.

She straightened. "Do you—"

The pop of floo cut her off, and moments later Theo waltzed into the room, carrying his own bag of presents. After setting it down, the brothers hesitated and then both gave nods of recognition.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Titus broke the silence. "I didn't know if you would."

“I couldn’t miss seeing Hermione’s expression while opening my gift. I’ve been holding onto it for months.”

---

The Nott household still adhered to the rule of homemade gifts, and Hermione exchanged them, her mug of cocoa long empty.

Theo’s present came first— a blanket made of the wool from a magical breed of golden ibex, infused with the powdered remnants of its horn. Together it created a scent similar to amortentia, though not as powerful, creating a soothing sleep environment.

“I didn’t make it entirely, of course,” Theo explained. “But I did find the horn and learned the infusion spell for the wool. I hope that’s enough not to break the rules.”

“Thank you.” Tears pricked her eyes at the thoughtfulness as she placed the bundle to her nose. A warm sensation of comfort buzzed through her, wishing to bury her face into it all day.

“What does it smell like to you?” Titus asked in a curious tone.

She stiffened, brought back to the present. “Hopper.”

Though there were fragments of cinnamon too, almost unnoticeable.

His expression softened at the neutral statement, and he didn’t press for more.

Hermione opened the present from Titus with much more trepidation. Sliding the paper off, she discovered a dramatic pink quill and inkpot set.

“It’s a fwooper feather,” he explained. “With a nib nearly unbreakable, and the ink is charmed to never need a refill. I figured you’d want a practical gift, as always.” He clutched at his knees, sitting rigid on the couch.

She stared at the quill for a moment in silence. Fwooper feather quills were expensive and hard to find within the boundaries of the curse.

“It’s lovely,” she finally said, and he loosened his hands in response. “But it’s not handmade.”

“I’m saving that gift for later. This one, and the others you’ve yet to unwrap, are just to spoil you.”

The thought of a private gift made her nervous. “Just don’t laugh at the pathetic thing I made you then.”

He froze, unmoving for several seconds. “You made me a gift?”

She did make him one. What better way to have Titus warm up to her than to participate in the traditions they used to enjoy?

Hermione reached toward the bottom of the dwindling pile of presents, picked up a small, badly wrapped gift, and handed it to him.

He clutched it and brought it into his lap, brushing his thumb over the paper in reverence.

“It’s not much,” she warned. “Lower your expectations.”

He shook his head, eyes still attached to the present. He unwrapped it slowly, tugging the edges back, and he bit his lower lip, trying to stop a grin. “A hat.”

“I knitted it.”

“I didn’t know you knew how.”

She shrugged. “Tabitha taught me long ago— or she tried to at least. It was easy enough to pick up again with Bitty’s help, though I had to work on it in the treehouse so that you didn’t see it.”

He placed it on his head, fitting snug against his brow— maybe too snug— and he kept having to tug it roughly down to stay.

It looked odd on him. Informal and unserious. Completely opposite of his normal imposing persona. She’d picked the colour brown because she thought the neutrality would work with more outfits, but it contrasted terribly against his skin tone.

“Maybe I got your measurements wrong.” Hermione blushed, feeling foolish.

“I love it. More than you could ever know. I’ll cherish it as if it were made of golden yarn.” Titus’ grin turned mischievous. “But I might only wear it at home.”

She threw a pillow at him, rolling her eyes to let him know his teasing didn’t upset her.

---

The rest of the day proved achingly normal— so normal she almost forgot she’d ever left the manor.

They opened the rest of their presents at a leisurely pace. She had knitted a hat for Theo too, which somehow turned out even smaller than his brother’s. Titus gifted her some of his mother’s jewellery, a scarf, and a beautiful hat as well. She accepted each with a smile, and Titus’ dimples looked almost permanent with how much he smiled. Theo kept glancing from Titus to Hermione as if to detangle what had changed as they continued with their light banter. She could tell he had questions, but seemed to understand the holiday might be a ceasefire and relaxed.

After presents, they ate a roast with a bounty of delicious sides and desserts. The servingware filled her plate three times.

They lingered at the dining table for a long time, even as the dishes disappeared to be cleaned, listening to Theo tell stories about his time in the alps. By the end, he’d indulged in

too much of the fairy wine, singing an impromptu song he'd learned from the local wizarding tribes— badly. Off key.

Hermione laughed until her stomach hurt at the tortured noises he made.

“I now know why the ice spiders left you alone during your stay,” Titus said, cheeks flushed from his own indulgence in wine.

“I'll have you know that the spiders would love my sing—” he hiccupped and then blinked, seeming dazed. “I'm drunk, aren't I?”

“Very.” Titus' eyes lit with mirth. “You should sleep it off in your room here tonight.”

Theo didn't fight the suggestion as Bitty led him away, a dreamless sleep in her hand and a vitamin potion in the other. When he woke up later, he could take a hangover cure, but he needed to let the alcohol filter through his system more for it to work.

When Theo disappeared, the light atmosphere vanished, leaving the two of them alone.

“Do you want my final present?” Titus asked.

---

Titus led her back to the sitting room and produced a blue wooden box with a lid on top. She sat on the couch, letting it rest in her lap, noticing it felt surprisingly light.

“Open it,” he urged.

Taking a breath, she lifted the lid to find around twelve envelopes neatly sitting inside. She picked one up, discovering it had no identifiable features on it. Not a name or address. Just an ordinary, blank white envelope, stuffed full.

She slid open the seam of one with her fingernail, pulling out the contents. Inside she found a picture of what looked like a castle, surrounded by water, along with a list of food, a few other lists she didn't look at long, and a single key.

“What's this?” she asked in confusion, holding up the photograph.

“An old French abbey named Mont-Saint-Michel. It's muggle, but I still find it extraordinary, and I think you would too. The tide comes in and out, creating an island. There's something magical about it.”

“I don't understand what these are.” She opened the envelope again to see if anything else would come out.

“Adventures,” he explained, eyes intent on her reaction. “Each envelope is a pre-planned getaway. To my shame, I admit I might have insulated you a bit too much in an effort to protect you. But you have a spirit that wants to learn and explore, and there are so many wonders in our world you've yet to see.”

Her heart rose and then sank. “I—”

“I’ve also made a list of food to try at each location,” he said quickly. “And I’ve researched nearby activities. You can decide which to pursue while we’re there. Most of the locations are in the UK, but I’ve obtained special permission from a few countries nearby.”

Her soul ached, hating that she loved everything about the gift, while also knowing they held strings. “These are dates?”

“Yes— the ones I promised you.” He swallowed hard, seeming anxious about her reaction. “What do you think?”

She lifted her eyes. “It’s everything I wanted.”

It scared her how fast her heart thumped. In pain. To the beat of a long dead hope. The box in her hand threatened to crack the ice around her chest.

In another universe, what he’d just gifted her would have been enough hope and drive to be content. Enough outside experience and adventure to soothe her soul.

She’d feel *seen* by him.

But now she knew more about him and the world—ugly things that would make it impossible to appreciate travelling without knowing every coin he spent was coated in innocent blood.

Titus slowly stood, eyes on her. Gently pulling her up by the elbows, he took the box from her grasp and set it aside, cradling her cheeks in a firm hold without breaking eye contact.

His chest rose and fell at a rapid pace, and she knew what he wanted to do. She saw the longing in his eyes.

Hermione tried to respond, but he kissed her forehead, lips lingering until he moved to her cheeks, brushing toward her nose. When he lowered his lips to her mouth, he paused, hovering without touching, gaze pleading. Hermione felt frozen, unable to move. Not knowing if she should pull away or let it happen. Was this too fast for the plans? Would rejecting him now ruin everything? Their breath lingered together, and she did her best not to breathe in the familiar scent of him.

“I want to see your face light up in awe and happiness every day of my life.” Without giving her a moment to speak, Titus’ lips pressed firmly against her own, and he softly groaned against her mouth.

Hermione curled her fingers by his side. Her brain malfunctioned for a moment at the soft touch before she ripped backwards, stumbling out of his hold, pressing a finger to her lips. He let her go, grimacing at her retreat.

She understood far too late that Angel’s advice only worked easily in the absence of hate. Without grief, betrayal, or complications. How could she pretend to take refuge in his touch when the storm in her soul grew dark and violent?

Draco owned every piece of her that Titus tried to claim as his own.



It was proving to be far too easy to fall back into their old life, where he stayed a doting guardian, just trying to protect her and make her happy. A mocking imitation of a past life.

But the kiss jolted her back into reality. The Titus she'd known would never have done that.

Her heart shattered again, as if experiencing betrayal all over again. Her eyes must look wild, like a deer backed into a corner, and her hands trembled.

"Sprite—" he said, reaching for her only to lower his arm. "I just wanted to kiss you. Because I love you. Nothing more."

What Titus wanted from her could never happen. Not even if she didn't care for Draco. The things she'd seen couldn't be erased. The lies he told could never be seen as truth.

If she'd stayed in her golden cage, then her ignorance would have absolved her.

But she knew all of his unforgivable crimes.

*She knew.*

Hermione took another step back.

"Wait," he said, cheeks flushed pink, and this time she didn't think it was the wine. "Please don't run and hide. Today was perfect, and I don't want it to end yet. I won't try to kiss you again. We could walk around Hogsmeade and get some butterbeer to pass the time. Or maybe just sit here by the fire and play some chess. Anything you want... please, just don't go."

"I—I need to think," she said, attempting to be neutral.

His expression shuttered, and his body straightened, though his cheeks remained flushed. "I understand."

Hermione bit her tongue until she thought it might bleed, knowing she needed to swallow every real reaction. She wished to race to her room, scream into a pillow. Destroy something in her horrid confusion. She wished to go to the treehouse and talk with Draco for hours. Wish him Merry Christmas and fantasise about the time they spent together.

But if she ever wanted to be free, the foolish doll in her who showed every emotion, who acted on impulse, needed to die.

Her body vibrated with all the love and hate in her body, until she focused on counting her breaths, reminding herself of her plans. Getting control of herself, she lowered the finger on her lips. "Hogsmeade would be nice."

Titus seemed to breathe again, and he slowly grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that. I've been craving a butterbeer."

---

Four days later, Hermione walked down the cobblestone streets, enduring the light mist in icy temperatures. The chill in the air made it almost too cold to stay outside for long.

But it was Saturday, which meant Titus brought her to Diagon Alley like he promised. She pretended to be a good little girl, following his rules.

“Is this a date?” she asked as they walked.

He raised an eyebrow. “Only if you wish it to be. Despite what I said, I don’t count it as an official one. You’ll see what a date is like in a few weeks. In the meantime, I want you to sort through the envelopes tonight and pick the first location.”

She swallowed, dreading the dates while simultaneously being damnably curious, having never seen much of the world.

Hermione led Titus around on a specific path, wishing it had been an auror with her instead. They stopped at the bookstore first. She stared at the shelves, needing to look focused, while he sat in a corner chair, reading the Prophet. After selecting a book, they made their way to Sugarplum’s Sweets, where she picked up a cauldron cake for later.

When finished, she posed her most important question, trying not to sound suspicious. “Could we go to Madam Malkin’s?”

He sneered in disgust. “Wouldn’t you rather order from France?”

“I don’t like picking from a catalogue. It’s boring. I’d rather see everything in person.”

He considered what she said. “Malkin’s leaves much to be desired, but if that’s what you want to do, then we’ll go.”

Her heart picked up pace with each step toward the robe maker. Hermione hoped Titus couldn’t detect the tremble in her fingers, the swoop in her gut, her quick breaths.

When they entered the shop, the attendant’s eyes widened when landing on Titus, glancing at Hermione in alarm, as if warning her not to go forward with her plans.

“Do you have any new fabrics?” Hermione asked.

“A few new shades of velvet,” the woman answered after a beat of silence. “And we have new imported fabric designs from Sweden.”

“I’d like three dresses made from your highest grade of fabrics—that is, if you can even manage something of quality.” Titus straightened his collar. “Two for casual wear, and a more formal one in red for an upcoming dinner.”

Hermione bristled at the way he ordered for her without asking her opinion, but she didn’t waste any energy on a response.

“Follow me,” the attendant said. Hermione froze a moment, wondering if Titus would follow too. If he did, then the day would be a waste. But he only sat in a side chair, opening the Prophet again.

Hermione brought every nerve under control as she walked into the back fitting room—the same space they’d used from the beginning.

When the curtain tugged closed, the lady glared at her. “This is very dangerous with the Butcher here. I’m risking a lot by allowing this.”

“I’ll have Draco pay you triple the amount.”

She pursed her lips, but after a few seconds thinking it over, the woman accepted the upgrade with a nod. “I’ll need to produce a real product this time.”

“You already have my measurements,” Hermione pointed out. “Pick any style of fabric. I don’t care. Just pretend to be showing me different styles and make it seem as if I’m having a difficult time deciding.”

The woman hesitated, but ultimately left her alone.

Hermione waited in the center, wondering if Draco would show like she’d asked. The seconds hurt to endure, each feeling longer than a minute until she sensed the silencing charm zinging up around her, cocooning her in its embrace.

“Granger,” Draco's voice was ragged.

His silhouette could be seen near the far curtain, darkened from the corridor behind him, and when he stepped into the light, she gasped, shuffling backward in shock.

Blood dripped from him, rivulets running down his face. Blond hair stained crimson, droplets of blood splattered along his face and clothes, eyes red as a demon. And when he grinned, it lined his teeth.

“Are you injured?” she asked, mind still frozen by the sight.

“No.”

That left only one thing.

“What have you done?” she asked.

“What I promised.” He stalked toward her. “What I’ll do for every day they keep you from me.” With a swish of his wand, the blood vanished, leaving only his mutated eyes.

“You killed another person.” She didn’t know if it was a statement or question.

“Cornelius Fudge put up a bigger fight than I thought he would, but I needed a sacrifice, and he was on my list. Blood magic always leaves things so... messy.”

Hermione had to search her memory for the name, before remembering a man with a thick brown moustache. He’d been a contender for Minister, losing several times to Filibus. And she’d seen him in the crowd of the Wizengamot, raising his hand with the others.

“What ritual did you do?”

Draco’s stone face gave nothing away as he reached her and collapsed to his knees, pulling her closer, resting his forehead against her lower stomach, as if taking the first breath in a long time. “I fear I’m going mad.”

Glancing down, she didn’t withhold her second gasp, fingers trembling as she stroked his knuckles. Horror sliced into her heart.

The veins in his hands had blackened under pale skin, creating a topography of dark rivers, threading up to his wrists where it tapered off and disappeared.

Only dark magic could produce that— very dark magic.

“What have you done?” she whispered a second time.

He ignored her question again. “Everyone has been taken from me. First my mother. Then Deanna. My sister. Now you. I don’t know if I can endure the emptiness much longer.”

A chill went through her, remembering Snape’s warning to Titus. How Draco had been unbalanced since a boy. How they’d found him, holding his mother’s severed hand in the chaos. Madness ran through the Black bloodline, made evident in his aunt. A mixture of obsessive tendencies and twisted magic from their grimoire.

“No,” Hermione said firmly, kneeling with him. “No!” She grasped his face, forcing his red stare to look at her. She didn’t flinch with the way it tried to burn through her. “I don’t care what you’ve done. I’ll be your tether to reality if I must. But don’t use dark magic again, especially from the Black grimoire. It’s not worth it.”

“You don’t get to tell me what’s worth it or not.” His body trembled. In fury, she realised, as his grasp on her tightened. “They believed me to be weak when they took you. So I’ve done what I had to— in the only language people like Nott understand. Violence, blood, and power. It’s all they respect, so I’ll show them that they’ve made a grave misjudgement— that I’m just as damned and ruthless as they are. By the end, I’m going to kill them all, Granger. That’s my vow. Every last one of them. Everyone who tried to hurt you. Everyone who took you from me. And I don’t care what it costs.”

“Not at the expense of your soul.”

The entire Wizengamot. He didn’t need to list the names for her to know who he meant.

“You’re mine.” His lips pressed against her in a crushing kiss, as if to consume her, before tugging back, hands cradling the back of her head. “You chose me. Say it to me.”

“I’m always yours,” she said, clenching her teeth. “That means, Draco, that if you destroy your soul, then I’ll destroy mine. You won’t be able to stop me. That’s *my* vow. You’re not the only one who’s on the edge of madness.”

Something snapped in his expression. He grabbed the edge of her skirts and tugged them up to her hips, forcing her to lay back with a single shove. “Infuriating fucking witch.”

Her mind blanked, feeling him peel away her clothing and then his own in anger.

“We don’t have time,” she whispered, watching as Draco dipped his head down to trail his tongue from her stomach and further between her open thighs. “Titus is waiting in the front. He might discover us.”

“Let him wait,” he groaned between kisses and licks, holding her firmly in place, teasing and torturing her until she forgot all of her worries. “I need this, Granger. If I die with my head between your thighs, then I’d consider that a good death.”

He tortured her with his tongue until she almost reached orgasm, and then he cruelly flipped her on her hands and knees, denying her release as he pushed her chest into the ground with one hand tangled at the base of her hair, lifting her hips into place with the other.

“If Nott ever searches your mind again, I want you to show him this.”

Through the reflection of the floor mirror, she watched as he entered her from behind, fucking her hard from the start, his eyes turning a darker red with lust. Her breasts scraped against the floor with each rough jolt, sending a delicious tingle down her spine.

This wasn’t making love. It was a reclaiming. Proof of possession. She felt every inch of him as she clenched around him. But it only left her wanting more. It was never enough. The weeks apart from him had stripped away her sanity too. How did she survive not having him like this?

"I want the Butcher to see how you look at me," he said again. "I want him to see what he'll never have, even if he tries to force it from you." With a hand on her neck, he tugged her up. Holding her up under her knees, he spread her legs into an obscene pose while pushing up inside her. She tried to tilt her head back in ecstasy, but he moved his shoulder, so her eyes stayed on the mirror.

"Keep focused," he sneered, teeth grazing her shoulder as if to mark her. "I need him to see that every time he looks away, you're right back in my arms." He wrapped a hand around her thigh, placing the heel of his palm on her clit, pulling firmly up, until she cried out from the pressure, creating an ever-clearer view of him sliding in and out of her.

Nothing else existed except the curling pleasure in her lower stomach, the way she felt so full and complete, the secret thrill of knowing Titus sat just outside.

The orgasm burst slowly, overtaking her, lingering with each rock of his hips until he stilled inside her. They rested against each other after finishing, both sitting up, her legs still upheld and spread, shivering and panting deep breaths.

“Most of all,” his voice went lower. “I want Nott to be haunted by this.” In the reflection, he slid out of her, the shared aftermath of sex sliding down her thighs. “Now take your fingers and put it back inside you— where it belongs.”

Sliding her fingers past her swollen lips, still sensitive to the touch, she moaned as her fingers gently teased herself, making sure every indecent angle of her was visible as she obeyed his

demand.

Their meeting must end soon, but the thought of leaving his arms to go back to the manor almost made her ill. She'd do anything, give *anything*, to stay in this spot forever. Eventually, he kissed her flushed neck and released her.

Before cleaning between her thighs, he cradled her lower stomach. "Maybe I should leave a part of me behind."

They both stilled, contemplating it. He could try and get her pregnant right now. The thought thrilled and terrified her.

But Titus would use it as a reason to finally eliminate Draco. A new heir meant the father became expendable. And she couldn't risk it.

Lily advised her not to get pregnant, and she believed her warning, no matter the father of the baby. In her circumstance, children would be another shackle, preventing her from escaping. She didn't doubt Titus would raise Draco's baby as his own, if it meant keeping her stuck in the manor forever.

"Not yet," she said. "I'm not sure how long I can deter him. Soon I might have to pretend that his potions are working."

"If you can't get away from Nott, I will give you a piece of me forever," he promised.

Though it sounded like a demand, she knew it to be an offer—possibly a plea, since he'd given her the power over her own fertility.

She shivered at the choice. "Only if all else fails."

He helped her up, straightening her clothes before putting his own back on.

"Did you ever break the codespeak?" she asked. Since giving him the information, he'd sent back the magnifying glass every morning so she could copy another hundred parchments for him to study. But he didn't give any clues on his progress.

He grinned, as if containing a secret. "I've done more than that."

"What do you mean?"

"If my father taught me one thing, it's that intelligence is currency, and now I hold more of it than anyone else." Draco tucked a curl behind her ear, changing his eyes from red to ice grey. "The Order's been reckless in the past, acting on every piece of information, without even second guessing if it was planted by a double agent. Or worse... not acting at all. Even the Slytherins in their ranks have been disappointing. A true strategist knows to draw attention to your right hand before striking with your left, moving in a chaotic manner, so they can't guess your next move... or know where your information came from."

"You're forcing Sirius to work with you?" she asked in shock. By his statement, he also protected her by reducing Titus' suspicions of a leak.

“Right now, I ask my cousin to jump, and he begrudgingly asks how high. Though I know he’s desperately searching for a way to reduce his dependence on me.” He gave her a final kiss before donning his cloak, moving toward the exit.

“Wait,” she urged, and he looked over his shoulder. “I didn’t get you a gift for Christmas.”

“You’re all the gift I need.” He waved his hand, showing his blackened veins, before giving a swish of his wand, hiding the aftereffects of the curse with a concealment spell, slipping on gloves. “My gift to you will be revealed in a few hours. The risks you took for information are finally coming to fruition.”

The thought made her uneasy, knowing the cost it extracted from him.

Draco must have seen the questions in her gaze, but he didn’t elaborate, only giving a dark smirk as he swept out of the room, leaving her alone.

---

Hermione waited for her flushed cheeks and heart to calm down before walking toward the store front. When she entered, Titus folded the prophet with a strange expression painted on his face. He examined her with a quick sweep of sharp eyes. His concern faded, replaced by a slow smirk, as if knowing something she didn’t.

“Are you satisfied with your selections?” He emphasised the phrase in an odd way.

“Yes.”

“You took a long time in the fitting room... most of it alone.”

“I couldn’t make a decision.”

“You must be exhausted from today. *Come...* let’s get you back home.” He tucked the Prophet back into his cloak and held out his arm for her to take. Again, he seemed to be privy to a private joke.

She curled her hand around his arm, fingers trapped in the curve of his muscles. As they walked outside, he kept stealing glances at her, and the tension between them increased for a reason she couldn’t unravel.

Did he know about Draco?

No, he’d be angry. Not acting so pleased.

The mystery lingered as they continued down the cobblestone streets. When they entered the Leaky to go through the floo, he leaned close while grabbing the powder on the fireplace. “Your heart rate went up at Malkin’s.”

She froze as he led her through the floo into Nott manor, struggling to find a response when they stepped into the sitting room, unsure what he knew.

“I was upset,” she said, trying to keep the panic from her features.

He didn't move toward her, though his gaze turned predatory—darkened and hungry.

“That’s what I thought at first too, which is why I didn’t bother you. Maybe you were dealing with your moments of grief. But— it didn’t match earlier patterns and kept getting faster, almost frantic. When I questioned the assistant, she assured me that you wanted to be *alone*.” He took a step closer, and she plastered herself against the stone, wary of his mood. “What were you doing in there by yourself with a racing heart?”

Pure fear strangled her mind. Maybe he did suspect something, and this was the beginning of an interrogation. “I didn’t—”

“Don’t lie to me.” He reached out and brushed her cheek with a thumb. “There’s no sign of tears, and your cheeks are still pink. It gives you away.”

She must look an idiot, unsure how to respond. She’d forgotten he could sense her heart rate through the bracelet. When she’d had her tryst in the bathroom with Draco, she’d already been upset, giving her a cover, or maybe Titus had been too distracted. Either way, he noticed it this time.

He had to sense her fear now. The way her heart pounded.

“Haven’t I told you that there’s no need to be embarrassed with me?” His smirk looked sinful and knowing. “You must have been so frustrated.”

Embarrassed?

Hermione glanced up, meeting his eyes, and she calmed her terror enough to understand.

Titus thought she’d masturbated— and she didn’t know if she was relieved or mortified by the conclusion.

“I didn’t know you’d sense it.”

His eyes sparked with the words, and he moved closer, hands placed on either side of her head, cornering her against the stone of the fireplace. “I think a part of you did know. It was agony, sitting there, wishing I could go help. Imagining it—” He ran his tongue along his lower lip as if tasting something not there. “Do me a favour and paint the picture for me, love. Where did you touch yourself first? Did you spread your legs to see yourself in the mirror, stroking your pretty pussy?”

Heat rushed to her face again, and it must be bright red now.

She nodded with a nervous swallow, knowing she needed to skirt the truth so he couldn’t sense a lie.

His face tilted down, pupils blown with desire.

At that moment, a wetness dripped past the edge of her knickers. She realised in horror that Draco had forgotten to erase all the traces of him. The sensation slid just past her knickers, and she squeezed her thighs together to stop it.



“Next time, I want you to use me instead.” He let one hand trail down her shoulder, fingers stroking the fabric of her clothes. “Think of me as only a tool, if you want. There’s no need to ever be so desperate for release. It doesn’t have to be love. It doesn’t even have to be sex. No expectations. Nothing more than what you desire. After all, my fingers can reach far deeper than yours. I can fill all the empty places you wish. And if you’re too wary of my touch, I can always use a shadow again. The only thing I ask from you is to watch.”

A filthy desire bloomed low in her stomach at the image he conjured, imagining using the shadow to fuck herself as she pleased, torturing Titus by only allowing him to look and not touch as she reached oblivion over and over again.

In the charged silence, he leaned closer, fingers now at her hip, curling the fabric of her skirt into his fist.

Would she deny him? Push him away? Tell him that Draco had just fucked her? That she’d let his hated enemy come inside her, even considered letting him breed her, and that the evidence was there if he ran his hand up her inner thigh?

Titus ripped any decision from her hands, capturing her mouth in a kiss almost violent in intensity. With nowhere to back away, she whimpered, placing her hands against his shoulders as if to push away. He grabbed both her hands, transferring them around his neck.

“Titus,” she tried to warn when he released her to allow for a breath. But he didn’t give her another chance to respond, seizing her into another mind-numbing kiss, moving with expertise, her back pressed tight to stone. Biting. Nipping. Sucking her bottom lip.

He tugged up her legs from the ground, resting her thighs on his hips, shoving her skirt up her thighs, moving her into the perfect position so that his noticeable erection pressed hard against her knickers. Still sensitive from earlier, she gasped, and he groaned at the same time, and she wondered if he felt the wet remnants of sex.

“Wait,” she said, as he trailed down her neck with his tongue, tasting every inch of skin, teeth grazing her clavicle. He rocked his hips into her, and her body jolted in pleasure, making it hard to think. Calloused hands scraped along her bare skin, going higher and higher.

Through the haze, she remembered Angel’s plan, knowing she needed to slow it down. This was far beyond breadcrumbs of affection and knew she walked the tightrope between gentle resistance and rejection.

“Wait,” she said again.

“I’ve waited years.”

She moved her hands to his shoulders again, prepared to push him away If he ignored her again

His mouth moved toward the swells of her breasts, his hands almost to her arse, when a pop of the floor sounded beside them.

A face appeared, green against cinders, but she couldn't see who from her position.

"Go the fuck away," Titus snapped without looking, mouth against her fluttering pulse.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," she heard a familiar voice say— Thorfinn Rowle.

"You'll more sorry if you say another word. I told everyone to leave me the fuck alone today. And you chose to intrude at the *worst* possible moment."

"Apologies, sir," Thorfinn said, "But there's been an emergency."

Titus let his face rest against the curve of her neck for a long moment, as if soaking in some calm, reining in his temper. And then he turned to the cinders. "What is it?"

"Our aurors found the entrance into the Bristol tunnels and breached it."

Titus pulled back, letting her legs slide off his hips, wobbling with adrenaline. Reaching into his pocket, he checked his wand and extra holsters he always had on him. "Excellent. Give me an hour, and I'll join the—"

"I'm sorry, sir, but—" Thorfinn looked more uncomfortable than she'd ever seen him. "The mission was not successful."

Titus turned to fully face the embers, every muscle as tight as steel.

"There better be a good explanation." His voice sounded deadly in its warning. "After all of the weeks of planning, there was no way to fuck it up."

"As you ordered, twenty-five of our best entered the tunnels at the weakest point. The remaining wards were a challenge, but nothing we didn't expect or couldn't handle." Thorfinn took in a visible breath. "But the rooms were empty when we arrived. No one was there. We tried to exit, sensing something off, but a poisonous gas began to overtake us."

"A trap," Titus inferred with terrifying calm.

Thorfinn gave a single nod. "None of our charms or shields withstood it. I've never encountered anything like it, melting the skin from bones. It dripped like liquid. Some of the darkest magic I've ever seen, resembling a skull as it rushed toward us. It must have been created with blood rituals. Possibly even death magic. Only Robertson and I were close enough to the exit to get out in time, and he sustained horrific injuries to his lower legs."

Hermione tried to keep the reaction off her face, thinking of the empty tunnels.

Death magic—

This was Draco's gift.

"And the rest?" Titus asked through clenched teeth.

“Most dead, I suspect, though from the sounds they made, it was horrifically slow. Some can still be heard screaming.”

“Bloody fuck!” Titus cursed, expression shuttering, turning back into the Butcher. “They’ve never delved into death magic before— even we wouldn’t do that. Too costly. It’s unlike them, and I know very few who would have the talent or the stomach for it. And how would the Order know in time to evacuate and set up a curse? Someone must have—” He closed his eyes, sucking in a sharp breath, regaining calm. “The brutality of this was a direct message to me. One I won’t ignore. Rowle, go back to Bristol. I’ll join you soon. See if we can save any of the trapped aurors. And then we’ll figure out who did this and pay back retribution, life for life.”

“Yes, sir.”

The floo embers faded. Titus faced the fireplace for a long time as Hermione kept her body still and out of the way. “Bitty!”

The elf popped into the room. “Yes, master.”

“Fetch my uniform. The one for hunting. All of my best armour too.”

“Yes, master,” Bitty said again before popping away.

The house elf arrived soon with his uniform. He dressed quickly, uncaring if she saw his nudity. Hermione kept her eyes high, only viewing the outline of his impressive form as he shoved on his cloak, armour clicking into place. He moved toward the floo as if to leave, but Hermione picked up something he’d left in his haste on the side table.

“You forgot your gloves,” she said. He glanced back, blue eyes bright.

He walked over without a thank you, slipping them onto his large hands, giving the crinkle sound of leather, supple after much use. “Will you allow me to kiss you goodbye?”

“I suppose,” she said.

He gathered her into a gentle hold, giving a chaste kiss so different from the one before— like a dragon knight with a princess. A promise to come home.

She wasn’t a fool to fall for the illusion he wished to create, watching as he slid his dark mask into place.

“Be careful,” she said, knowing it was what he wished to hear. He stilled for a moment, and she thought he must be smiling under his mask.

“I’m sorry our day was cut short. I’ll make it up to you later. Don’t wait up for me.” Without looking back again, he picked up some powder, disappearing into the floo.

Hermione stayed in place for a long time, staring at the dying embers, and then walked through the manor, entering the back sitting room of his mother’s.

The afternoon light warmed her skin as she watched the ballerina twirl. A neverending performance, even without an audience.

Only when assured of privacy did she allow herself to smile. It wasn't a gentle thing, but sharp as a knife with teeth of metal, revelling in the destruction she'd helped orchestrate. She imagined the men in the tunnels, skin melting slowly from their bones, conjuring each scream of agony, and she looped it in her mind like a lullaby, knowing they'd done far worse to innocent people.

This was just the beginning, she promised herself. With the information she and Draco were supplying to the Order, they could do much more damage.

Titus believed them to be cut from the same cloth, and perhaps that was true to a degree. But he also believed her to be inherently softer than him, less calculating, less bloodthirsty. Something he could form into the shape he wanted over time, as if she was made of clay instead of flesh.

What she'd come to understand was that wizards like him believed themselves to be rightful rulers of all they could conquer, securing dominion over all the creatures on the earth, including muggleborns. A natural hierarchy created by and for them.

But what they failed to see was that muggleborns were born with the same fangs, and she'd make sure to show Titus, along with all the purebloods, how dangerous it could be to hunt and cage their own kind.

Hermione refused to be a foolish little doll anymore, hoping for fairness in the world. Wishing to see the good in people, letting her soft heart overrule her natural rage.

She'd learn to be a lion instead, crouching in the tall grass. A spider, building its web. A snake coiled in preparation to strike. A manticores crooning its song.

Hermione vowed to become a witch worthy of her father's sacrifice.

And then she'd patiently wait for the predators in her midst to make their fatal mistake.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of your comments on here and other social media. I can't always respond, but I read every one (and sometimes reread if I feel I need the extra motivation).

## Chapter 50: The Miracle of Life

### Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: Ofdrykkja - Hårgalåten.

Thank you for all the lovely reviews! I reread them all the time while I'm editing.

Also, a big thank you to my alpha team and my amazing beta, MyPrivateInsanity. Without them, there would be so many little plot holes lol.

Hermione pressed the listening device into her ear, struggling to hear. The charms the twins created had already started to fade, crackling with static.

“Keep me informed on your progress eliminating the curse,” Titus told a lower-ranking auror. “I don’t think we’ll be able to dissipate it entirely, but containing it to a single room might be possible. Hire the goblins as a last resort.”

“Yes, sir.”

Titus didn’t respond, but it must have been a dismissal, because she heard footsteps echo as the auror exited. Hermione kept the earpiece in, knowing he had another floo visitor waiting just outside his study— an unfortunate-looking man named Corban Yaxley who’d entered the manor twenty minutes before, giving her a hideous smile as he passed her. From what she’d heard over the years, despite him being an original Death Eater, he’d fallen out of favour with Dolohov.

Titus rarely allowed auror business in his study, but he’d been tired from the week of crisis management and wanted to stay close to home. Each day, he returned exhausted from Bristol, only having energy to tug her into his arms after crashing into bed, then promptly falling asleep.

The sound of a door opening echoed through the earpiece as Yaxley entered, footsteps shuffling inside until his body lowered into a chair.

“It’s good to see you, Titus. The—”

“I’m not in the mood for pleasantries. Get to the point.”

A brief silence occurred. “My Whispers say Dolohov ordered Snape to start the Potter girl’s Trial.”

Hermione's body turned numb with horror.

“Bloody hell,” Titus cursed. “What is he thinking? She’s only fifteen.”

“Sixteen now, I believe.”

“That’s no better.” Titus tapped his wand against the desk, showing his agitation. “How did Snape respond?”

“Irritated and angry.”

The tapping of the wand stopped. “Don’t tell anyone else. Let me talk it over with Dolohov and try to change his mind.”

“How do you plan to solve it?”

“Snape’s right, some of the old guard might protest this one. And if they don’t protest this one, they might the next. The Potter girl is not a muggleborn. Her father was a traitor, but he was also a pureblood from the Sacred Twenty-Eight.” His chair creaked as he leaned back. “If this is to go forward, it needs to be handled like the old marriages. We need to convince Snape of the necessity and then allow him to choose a suitable partner her age.”

“What about the young Malfoy? He’s not much older than her.”

Titus gave a derisive scoff. “Lucius wouldn’t approve of the risk, since her fertility is not guaranteed... among other potential complications.”

“Who else then?”

Titus took a moment to contemplate the question. “Krum.”

Hermione sat up in shock, pressing the earpiece tighter in case she’d misheard.

“The younger brother of Viktor? How old is he?”

“Only a year or so older than the girl. His family’s been creating waves of dissent after their son’s death, which is spreading. Bulgaria’s stopped trade with us in protest, and the new heir is louder than he should be, giving statements that could be construed as declarations of war. The family needs to be appeased. A match with the first potentially fertile halfblood might smooth over tensions.”

“And if she’s not?”

“We’ll create a contract where she’ll retain the given rights as a citizen of Great Britain, allowing her the ability to return to her guardian unharmed if she doesn’t produce a child, which might help Severus’ resistance. In this case, I’d personally pay restitution for their

wasted time out of my own vaults, and we'll arrange for Krum to choose another breeder sans a Trial."

"That may work," Yaxley agreed.

"It might," Titus sounded weary. "Your Whispers are valuable, but if you have nothing else to tell me, I'd like you to leave. My house elf will have your galleons by the floo."

"I have one more thing to discuss," Yaxley sighed. "There's been another one— left in Diagon Alley, this time in broad daylight. It seems he's getting bolder."

The silence felt heavier, filled with things inferred. "I know. It's my job to deal with it. What does it matter to you?"

Another one? Hermione strained to listen, sensing the importance.

Yaxley shifted in his seat again as Titus waited. "The old wizards are starting to get nervous."

"I know this too. Do you have anything relevant to say, or are you just here to waste my time?"

"The Reaper—"

"Don't fucking say that name in my presence ever again," Titus seethed. "This terrorist doesn't deserve any accolades."

Even through the earpiece, Hermione sensed Yaxley's nerves while dealing with an irate Titus. "It's just what the people have started to call him since his last message, and they're unsettled with his growing brutality. He killed the elder Montague this time without magic, as if he was a filthy muggle, peeling the skin from his—"

A hard object slammed into the wooden desk. "*I fucking know!*"

A dark thrill raced through Hermione mixed with a low dread, much like it did every time a missive she sent to Draco proved productive. The elder Montague had been the main subject of several, which piqued her curiosity, and she'd pieced together enough to discover his investments in the camps— the acquisition of women to be specific. He'd set up environments for the bounty hunters to trick muggle women to "steal" in public spaces, and then arrested them for contrived reasons that brooked no argument from the crowds. And then later, he took a portion of the earnings.

When Hermione learned about the insidious trade, she'd begged Draco to find some way to disrupt the system. Though she didn't mean for him to bloody torture the man to death! Especially not in a way which caused the public to whisper a name with the same fear they did the Butcher. It only placed a target on his back.

She wondered what message Draco left, hoping he at least gained some valuable information worth the risk.

Hermione chewed on her thumb nail, still listening in, while suppressing her distress.

“Fear is bad for business,” Yaxley explained. “My Whispers— they could help. They know things others don’t, and they say the Red Room might be a target.”

“Your club?” The tapping of his wand began again. “Why would the terrorist bother?”

“There will be a special performance in a month's time. Many members of the Wizengamot enjoy our shows. They’d be like sitting ducks.”

“What would you like in exchange for this information?” Titus always saw through people’s motivations.

“I don’t have an heir, and I’ve run out of tokens. I also don’t have the money to buy a used breeder.”

Titus understood without going further. “Do you have a certain one in mind?”

“Rabastan Lestranger’s—”

“She’s pregnant and already has a child,” Titus interrupted. “Are you willing to raise them as your own?”

Abigail, Hermione remembered. She’d been heavily pregnant the first time she’d met her. Rabastan didn’t bed her much, but Rodolphus did, and he didn’t even give her time to recover from birth before he kept at it. Since the Lestrangers’ deaths, she didn’t know where Abigail ended up, but assumed she became the ward of the ministry until a new owner bought her. Hermione’s stomach turned so sharply that she wouldn’t be surprised if she retched out her breakfast.

Yaxley made a noise of disgust. “I don’t want another man’s brats. I’ll let her finish out the pregnancy, of course, and then I can give them both to another pureblood to raise. A couple with no hope of having one. That should satisfy all parties involved, along with the ministry.”

“The breeder might resist you if you take her children.”

“She’ll get over it. I’ll treat her well. Better than Lestranger did, for sure.”

Titus gave a low hum. Hermione couldn’t tell if it was in agreement or not. “If what you’ve said is true, then you can have her. I’ll pay the fee.”

The thought of the authorities ripping Abigail's children away was too terrible to comprehend.

“How can we ensure the terrorist arrives at the trap?”

“If *The Reaper* is who I think he is,” Titus rolled the name off his tongue with complete disdain. “Then I already possess the perfect bait.”

---



Hermione pretended to be busy with her knitting in her old room, stuffing the listening device under her pillow temporarily as Titus led Yaxley back to the floo.

A few minutes later, he appeared in her doorway in his ministry wear, adjusting his tie.

“I have an errand to complete,” he explained, watching as her needles paused. “What are you working on?”

She held up a tiny sweater. “Clothes for Bitty and Eddy. I plan to leave them lying about so that they can receive them without getting distressed that I’m *giving* them clothes.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you. It’s awfully cold this winter,” Titus agreed, and his grin turned mischievous. His hand slid off the door frame as he straightened. “I’m sorry our first date will be pushed back, but I have a surprise for you that I hope makes up for it.”

“What is it?” she glared at him, not amused by his secrecy.

“That’s not how surprises work.” Instead of leaving, Titus hesitated for a minute too long, making the silence uncomfortable. “Do you want to talk about what happened between us?”

He meant the way he’d tried to devour her against the fireplace.

“No.” She continued moving her needles, pretending to be embarrassed, making the necessary loops.

It would look odd if she appeared too eager. Change had always spooked her, and he knew that, which is why he’d backed off from physical affection for a few days after, as if to gently acclimate her to the taste of him.

He examined her in a soft way, appreciating how she looked resting in her bed with the sunshine filtering through the nearby window, busy with a project. A perfect image of domesticity.

“Have you used your new quill yet?” he asked.

“I planned to do so today.”

“How so?”

She dug under her blanket and extracted a blank notebook and the pink quill and ink. “You said the other day that a mind healer suggested I should write down my thoughts somewhere to deal with all of my... grief. That it might help sort through what I’m feeling.” She nibbled her bottom lip. “I hope you don’t mind that I found this in your mother’s sitting room? It’s blank.”

“Of course not. Everything in this manor is yours as well.”

Hermione ignored the lie for the greater good, though her eye twitched involuntarily.

“You have to promise you won’t look at it.” She pointed a threatening finger in his direction in warning. “This is for my private thoughts. I’d never forgive you.”

“Cross my heart. I won’t open your diary, especially if it helps you heal.” He made a slashing motion on his chest. “Do try and behave while I’m gone.”

“I make no promises.”

Satisfied with their banter, he gave a familiar wink and left.

Hermione waited for thirty minutes after he left to pick up her quill, glaring at the bright pink fwooper feather, knowing exactly what it meant.

As she suspected, after a thorough search of the library, Titus had already extracted all of the books on magical birds in the hope she wouldn’t or couldn’t seek information out of curiosity.

Luckily, because of Finch’s vast knowledge and unending lectures, Hermione already knew everything about fwoopers and their feathers. Not only were the nibs unbreakable, but copying charms also easily adhered to them.

Using a similar spell as the charmed magnifying glass, the words she wrote with it would appear in a connected notebook, probably kept in his desk.

Titus had said “I promise not to *open* your diary,” not “I promise not to *read* your diary.” The careful wording left a glaring loophole, which gave a second avenue to monitor her activity without being overly intrusive.

Titus meant to spy on her, especially as she worked in the ministry with his missives, showing his obvious lack of trust in her. And after a fruitless second search through the manor for other quills, she knew he also wanted to force her to use his gift, pretending it meant something benign.

She’d use the damnable quill, but it would be on her terms.

The idea of a diary had arrived like a bolt of lightning the night before. A perfect way to lead Titus off course. He counted on her not discovering his attempt at spying, and she counted on his belief of her ignorance.

Hermione placed the nib to the paper, wondering how to start, knowing Titus would read every word, despite his promises.

**Dear Diary,**

**Today was rather boring. I knitted and read and not much else.**

Hermione devoted several paragraphs to mundane things, including missing her friends, before she arrived at what she intended.

**I have all the time in the world to think, but I don't really want to think, because every time I close my eyes, I can almost feel it again. I shouldn't entertain even the idea. I promised myself not to like the kiss, but I can't deny that I did like it just a little bit. Or perhaps more than a little.**

Hermione took a break to laugh, wondering if she'd gone too far.

**He wants to discuss what happened, but It scares me still... I think. I don't know. I'm not sure. Maybe I'm still angry. It's too confusing, and it's hard to sort through how I feel about it all.**

*Breadcrumbs of affection.*

**I've been thinking that I should try it one more time, just to examine the feeling closer. An experiment. Anything more than that would be too much, but just trying out a kiss like in the stories... that might be nice.**

Hermione reviewed the complete drivel she wrote, wishing she could see Titus' expression as he read it. Having fun, she placed the quill on paper and continued, veering off into other subjects. She wrote a full two pages of inconsequential thoughts and hopes for the future before putting it away to walk into the garden to retrieve the shrunken bag.

---

## **Draught of Plegia**

The bold letters sent a thrill zipping across her body.

After weeks— months— of scouring the multitude of books that Draco sent through the bag, sending each back in frustration, she finally found the potion.

Hermione's fingers shook while sitting in the treehouse, crouched over the book, tracing the words on the yellowed page written in archaic English. It took all of her previous practice deciphering old texts to translate the words into their modern form.

Darker than many potions she'd encountered, it paralysed a person, leaving them unable to move, yet aware of their surroundings. At its ultimate strength, it could become permanent. There were several forms of it, changed by a simple extra clockwork motion or dicing the rat spleen instead of slicing. Some additions made it more or less potent, along with diluting it with moon water. The variations of it went on for three pages, with ingredients that became more obscure, rare, and illegal as it went.

The specific variation she searched for appeared at the bottom of the second page. If created inside an area protected by blood wards, with an addition of the bark from a tree located on the grounds, the potion paralysed anyone living within the boundaries of the property who drank it for up to three days. But only ten people at a time. Any more than that, and it would shorten the length of the effects.

That was all right with Hermione.

Because she only needed to immobilise *one* person and a few elves, and only as long as it took to release her chains and trackers, escape, and run far, far away.

Hermione quickly went over the ingredients:

**Bubotuber Pus**

**Rat Spleen**

**Bark of a Blood Ward's Tree**

**Angel's Trumpet**

**Dandelion Root**

**Haliwinkle Leaves**

**Lavender**

**Sulphur Water**

**Acromantula Venom**

**Silver-eyed Horned Toad Slime**

Most of the ingredients were fairly common, though they might be difficult for her to obtain, since Draco couldn't send potion ingredients through the bag, and she couldn't count on when she'd see him next.

But the last two might be impossible, being both rare and hard to source. In fact, the final ingredient could only be found in the Forbidden Forest next to Hogwarts; the amphibians didn't shed their slime except every decade or so under *perfect* conditions, and the secretions were *highly* controlled by the ministry.

Though she'd expected some roadblocks, Hermione's adrenaline cooled, turning into disappointment as she considered what to do next.

The potion required two months to brew, but the last two ingredients only needed to be added in at the very end—which gave her several months to sort through the problems. All she needed to do now was acquire the first eight items to start the base.

Hermione pulled out a small, pointed stick she'd retrieved from the garden earlier and some ink, writing along a parchment. Since she couldn't find any other quill besides the fwooper feather, she needed to create a makeshift one.

Scratching along the parchment, she asked him for a new quill. She then explained what she'd heard about the trap at the club, warning him not to go, along with detailing all the information on the potion.

Opening the bag, she sent it through, and after closing it with a snap, she sat back on her heels.

“Hello Hermione,” an airy voice said behind her.

Hermione screamed, shoving the bag away in a haphazard manner, turning with her stick out like a wand, as if it could protect her.

Luna Lovegood stared back at her with wide eyes. She wore an odd outfit: leggings with red capped mushrooms sewn into them, a hat laced with flowers, and earrings of some type of plant she couldn't see from her angle on the ground.

“How did you get up here?” Hermione's hand trembled as she lowered the useless stick, while her heart still felt trapped in her throat. She tried to push the bag behind her, but Luna's eyes locked on it, and she tilted her head

“The red bucket, of course. Your elf told me so.”

“I didn't hear you come up,” Hermione said, knowing the fear in her voice made her sound angry.

“I've been told that I walk too quietly, though it's a useful skill when I'm trying to observe creatures. I'm sorry I scared you.” Her eyes once again zoomed in on the object Hermione attempted to hide, showing her to be too observant to be insane. “That bag is charmed and very old. I can tell. The edges vibrate just enough.”

Hermione had forgotten how odd the girl was. How she saw things others didn't.

“Please don't tell anyone.”

“I won't.” Luna walked over to the small couch and sat down, eyes now on the terrariums. “People tend not to believe what I say anyway.”

Hermione dropped the stick, sucking in several deep calming breaths. With the extra oxygen, she gained clarity. “This was Titus' surprise.”

“Was it a good one?”

“It certainly surprised me.”

Luna clenched the fabric of her skirt in her hands. It occurred to Hermione that the girl might be scared too, forced to go to a home owned by a man who had almost killed her. With her wide eyes and dreamy expression, she seemed forlorn in an endless way. Like staring at the sea on a dark night.

“I'm sorry for screaming,” Hermione explained, wishing to soothe her. “I just wasn't expecting you.”

“It's alright,” she answered. “I should have announced myself. It was rude of me. I sometimes forget what witches *should* do. There are so many rules that I didn't know before.

Mrs. Goyle is worried I'll say the wrong things to people, which is why she doesn't bring me out very much."

Hermione shrank the bag with a touch and placed it in her pocket. "This is the only way I can communicate with my friends. If Titus finds it, he'll take it away. You understand, right?"

"All of my friends are gone," her voice was much softer. "Or they're somewhere, but I might never see them again... so I understand."

Hermione changed the subject to something potentially even more strained, but she had to know, steeling herself for the potential answer. "I heard Mrs. Goyle knew your mum. Have they been... kind to you?"

"Oh, very much so. Mrs. Goyle likes to brush my hair and buy me clothes. Gregory takes me out to the sea to swim and collect seashells, and Mr. Goyle keeps my collections on the fireplace mantle. Though my favourite place in the castle might be when I'm alone in the gardens and the greenhouses."

Luna kept speaking, but Hermione's mind froze and then began churning, catching on to something.

"They let you into the gardens by yourself?"

"Of course," she touched her earrings. "That's where I got the Dittany. Mrs. Goyle told me to consider the castle my home."

The neurons in Hermione's brain fired and connected, and she almost shook with excitement. "Do the gardens grow lavender?"

"Yes. Are you wanting some?"

"What about haliwinkle leaves?"

"I think I've seen some."

She listed out a few more of the ingredients, each with an affirmative answer.

Hermione's grin filled with a dark hope. "Could you bring me some lavender? I love the smell, but my master doesn't like me to have plants. Perhaps you could wear them as jewellery— earrings. We'll hide them. The elves would never guess. And if Titus ever asked questions, Mrs. Goyle could confirm they are a part of your usual outfit."

Luna might be a little off, but when she met her eyes, she sensed she understood more than she let on, clever in a way that saw past the lies people constructed. She touched the dittany dangling from her ear again. "Is this important to you?"

"Very."

"Would it be important to others?"

“I hope so.”

Luna’s answering grin was soft and gentle, but there was something unyielding it too. “Then I think I could bring a new plant each time. Whatever you like.”

Hermione decided that she liked Luna Lovegood. Even without the plant earrings, and the potential to acquire ingredients, her presence calmed her. It was as if she could see right through Hermione’s mask to the painful center below, and it didn’t bother her in the way it did other people.

“I’d like for you to come back as often as possible,” Hermione said, answering her smile with one of her own. “By the way, I think you’re right. Your aura is yellow—just like the sun.”

---

“I’m told the girl stayed for several hours,” Titus said later that night at dinner, examining her expression.

She dabbed her lips with her napkin. “She did.”

“And? How was it?” Titus looked too hopeful. In the past, this expression would have irritated her, a reminder of her lost friends. He didn’t even allow Dean over, explaining that it might be too soon. The only way she knew anything about one of her oldest friends was from Draco through Pansy.

“I like her,” Hermione said. “As you know, she’s a bit barmy, but it was nice to talk to someone, even if it did end with us hunting the garden for wrackspurts.”

Titus gave a sharp laugh. “The Goyles said she can come over any time she’s able. They wanted to send her again tomorrow, but I told them we were doing something special.”

“Something special?” Hermione glanced up, setting aside her napkin. It would be a Monday, and Titus never took off work for trivial things.

He set his silverware down, shooed away the servingware, and leaned back in his chair. “Thorfinn’s new baby arrived. A girl this time. They invited us over to meet her.”

A baby! She remembered the chubby little boy clinging to Zala when she’d first met her. And then the next time, she’d been pregnant again.

Something occurred to her. “Isn’t it early?”

“A little bit, but the girl’s perfectly healthy.” He grinned so wide he displayed his dimples. “And they named me her godfather.”

“Congratulations,” Hermione said, sipping on her wine so that she didn’t have to say anything else, unsure if she meant it or not, already dreading the visit.

---

They arrived at Rowle castle by apparition, because the floor was being cleaned. It reminded her of Flint's, except much smaller. A modest dwelling in terms of pureblood standards, crumbling around the edges.

Children's laughter greeted her upon arrival, and without even fully opening the door, two young boys, who looked like copies of their mother, rushed out and tried to tackle Titus with loud shouts of excitement. Titus played along, tossing one in the air to catch him. The other toddler attached to his leg, giggling with each step forward.

Hermione realised that Titus knew the children well enough that they felt comfortable crawling all over him. She recognized the boy bleeding from injuries in a frantic Zala's arms after the attack on the ministry, and she tried to examine him for any lasting injury, feeling sick at the thought that the innocent child might have easily died that day. Luckily, he didn't even have any scars that she could see, which showed he'd received the best care at St. Mungo's.

"Play dragons!" Both the boys begged.

Titus set down the oldest. "Do I get to be the hero this time?"

"No! You de bad dragon," yelled the youngest, clutching a toy wand. He waved it at Titus, making whooshing noises as he cast imaginary spells.

Titus gasped and groaned, clutching at his chest and laying down, pretending to be dead.

The oldest boy turned to his brother with closed fists and a pout. "It was supposed to be my turn to kill the dragon. You did it last time!"

The younger boy just pointed the wand at his brother and kept pretending to fire spells.

"I'm telling mum that you're not playing by the—"

Titus jumped to his feet, growling ferociously. "The Dragon's still alive! Hide or I'll eat you!"

The boys forgot their argument and screamed, giggling as they ran away to what she thought might be a climbing fortress in the distance.

"I've warned you that if you start a game, they'll continue it forever," a deep voice said behind them.

Hermione turned back around to see Thorfinn in the main doorway, grinning at the scene. He held his youngest boy, who she'd already met at the first muggleborn luncheon. He sucked his thumb, possessing his father's startling pale eyes.

"You know I never mind." Titus brushed dirt from his trousers. "In just a few months, they've grown even bigger. Pretty soon they'll be taller than you."

"Our elf can barely keep up with how much food they eat."



Titus walked up to Rowle, clasping him on the shoulder. Of the two, Rowle remained bulkier and slightly taller. "A girl! I never thought you could produce one."

"I didn't think I could either. I'm almost afraid to hold her. She's much smaller than her brothers were." He shifted his little boy and gave a wave of welcome. "Come on in. Zala's excited for company."

---

The castle looked cosy and colourful. The couch cushions had been pushed out of place. Tapestries were tugged to the side. The shelves were dusty, the floor had a few crumbs, and toys were scattered around.

Though messy and lived in, it exuded warmth and happiness. As complicated as Zala and Thorfinn's journey had started, just by looking at their home, it was hard to deny the love between them.

Hermione followed behind Titus and Thorfinn as he led them toward the back bedrooms. When he opened a door at the end of the corridor, a silence descended, close to reverence. The mood seeped into her before she entered, soft in a way she hadn't experienced in a long time.

Zala rested on the bed, beautiful as always, even after birth, with her elf attending to her. She held a bundle wrapped in pink, swaddled tightly.

Despite the soft ambience, Hermione remained uncomfortable. Since denying Katie's friendship, she'd also refused to sit with Zala and the group. Did they hold it against her? She didn't know Zala that well and didn't want to intrude, especially during such a vulnerable time.

"Hermione!" Zala greeted with a warm smile, dissipating any concern of resentment. "And Titus. I'm glad you could come see me. I've been dreadfully bored cooped up in this room. Do you want to see the new addition to our family?"

As if pulled by a string, Hermione walked closer, and as she neared, Zala tilted the bundle, showing a glimpse of the baby. Pink skin, dark hair. Despite the fussy cry, her eyes remained closed, dreaming of nothing but safety and comfort.

"Beautiful," Titus whispered, hovering over her shoulder. "I have no words for how honoured I am that you chose me as her godfather. I hope you're recovering well." With a flick of Titus' wand, he conjured several vases of expensive undying flowers from the Nott greenhouses, floating them to a side table. "A gift for you both."

"Thank you." Zala admired the flower arrangements for a moment. "The birth was easy, and I'm perfectly fine, though Thorfinn likes to pretend I'm an invalid." She rolled her eyes. "And of course we'd want you as a godfather. Thorfinn doesn't trust anyone else with the title. Do you want to hold her?"

"I'd love to." Titus held out his strong hands, free from gloves. When Zala passed him the bundle, he cradled the tiny baby in the crook of his arm, peeking past the fabric. "Hello, little lamb."

On the other side of the bed, Thorfinn called out, "Tibly". An old nanny elf popped into the room, and he handed the toddler in his arms over. "Could you put him to bed while we have company?"

"Tibly would love to put the young master to sleep." Tibly soon exited with the boy clinging to her, still sucking on his thumb—the toddler almost as big as the little elf.

"I'm lucky that boy loves Tibly so much. Makes nap time easy. Juggling three kids while dealing with an infant is harder than I thought it would be." Thorfinn retrieved a glass of water and a snack, passing both over to Zala, before tucking the covers tighter. "Do you need anything else, my love?"

"I'm not helpless." Zala pretended to be annoyed, but her smile betrayed her. "I'm fine."

The new baby stole Hermione's attention again by letting out a soft cry, and Titus crooned at her. "None of that. Not with Uncle Titus. I'll make sure you never need to cry. Not a single tear all of your life."

Shedding her anxiety, Hermione wandered closer, studying the infant.

"Do you want to hold her?" he whispered.

"I worry I'd drop her." She'd never seen anything so small and fragile in her life. The nails on the miniscule hand flailing out of the blanket were the size of a grain of rice.

"I'll be here," he said. "There's nothing to fear."

Hermione reluctantly took the baby from his arms, shuffling around in an awkward hold, standing completely still, terrified to move. The weight managed to be nothing in her arms.

"She's perfect, isn't she?" he asked.

"Yes."

"A miracle."

To the purebloods, she was. Magical blood. Another heir to the line when they thought all hope had been lost. They'd enslaved muggleborns, kidnapping them from family, raising them for sacrifice—all for the new life cradled in her arms.

Hermione had to admit it *was* a miracle, but not because of magic. She held a *brand new* person. Someone who hadn't existed before, innocent of the deeds of her ancestors. A new start for the world. The girl could grow up to be a painter or a singer or a ministry worker. Maybe she'd love bugs like Finch or be interested in Runes.

Before Hermione escaped to save Julie, she'd considered getting pregnant with Draco. It was hard to imagine that if she'd followed through, she might be in that state now, belly rounded, the baby kicking against her stretched skin. But the child in her arms was the end goal of pregnancy, and that was even harder to imagine.

Hermione conjured a hypothetical child in her mind, half Draco. It would be a girl, she felt. With wild curls, maybe dark like hers. Grey eyes like her father. She'd be stubborn, of course. And hopefully a Gryffindor or a Hufflepuff, just to drive her father spare.

As she held the child in her arms, Hermione played out the entirety of a life she'd never conceived. Lost in a trance, she looked up, catching Titus staring at her in an intense way. He placed his large hand on the baby's soft head in a protective hold.

"Look how natural you are with a baby in your arms. You'll be such a great mum. I just know it."

And just like that, the spell shattered. She buried the hypothetical child in her mind. There wouldn't be a baby with Draco or Titus. Even if she wanted one— and maybe a terrified part of her did want one someday— she'd still never choose to bring a new life into this horrible world.

Not with the mist encroaching.

Not with the Rituals still in existence.

Her heart ached, lurching forward, as it had when she'd seen the wedding, knowing this was another thing denied to her. It made her woozy and queasy, and if she hadn't been clutching a newborn, she might have lost her balance.

This baby would die as easily as the rat if thrown into the volatile magic. It spared no one, old or young, guilty or innocent.

She glanced back at Zala, trying to keep the pity and fear off her face.

Even if a muggleborn found happiness with their master, it still wasn't a choice. Zala had been in the Trials too, drugged and raped under the moonlight ritual.

The room no longer felt like a sanctuary. Instead, it transformed into an impending grave.

Unable to hold the fragile life any longer, Hermione walked to the bed, intending to give the baby back to her mother, but Thorfinn swooped in and scooped his daughter up in a practised hold.

"This little one has been fed and burped. Now it's my duty." He kissed the baby's downy hair. "Let's give your mum a break."

---

After exiting the castle, Titus made his way over to the fort in the distance as he promised, playing dragons with fake duelling as the elves watched.

Hermione stood next to Thorfinn at the small castle entrance as he soothed the baby in his arms to sleep.

“We’d have made you a godmother too, if the laws would have allowed it,” Thorfinn said.

She kept her eyes on Titus in the distance. “I’d have been honoured.”

“No, the honour would have been ours. I still owe a life debt. I’m not sure what I can do to repay it.”

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” she joked. An idea unfurled her mind, remembering Titus’ conversations with Snape and Yaxley. Something dark zipped through her, knowing she’d need to proceed carefully. “I’m happy for you and Zala. I know you both wanted a girl.”

Thorfinn grinned, still gently swaying the baby. “Ah, well after three boys, it will be nice to play tea party a few times instead of sword fighting.”

“She might sword fight too,” she warned.

He nodded his head in agreement. “I hope she’s fierce. With her brothers, she might not have a choice.”

“Very true. Between you, her brothers, and Titus as her godfather, I pity the future suitors who wish to put in their Tokens.”

The giant froze, losing his grin. The energy in the air shifted instantly. “Tokens?”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione corrected quickly. “I misspoke. Of course, she won’t go through the Trials or rituals. She’s a pureblood.” Hermione slowly looked up, showing her concern.

“Right?”

“Right.” But he didn’t sound sure.

A long silence ensued as he absorbed the implications of the conversation.

Thorfinn's expression slowly turned to stone, and he cupped his daughter’s head with his giant hand, as if to shield her.

“She won’t,” he whispered, as if to convince himself. “They wouldn’t allow that.”

In the distance, the younger boy tripped and scraped his knee, interrupting the battle with a loud cry. As if that signalled the end to the game, Titus picked him up and carried him back, healing the minor injury with a tap. The oldest child kept close to Titus’ side, one hand on his arm, talking the entire way.

When he neared, Titus grinned and set the child down, ruffling his hair. He promised to come back and battle again before both the boys wandered off.

“It was good to see you, Nott,” Thorfinn told Titus before he could speak, all the warmth leached from his voice. “But the boys will need lunch soon.”

Titus furrowed his brow, noticing the sudden tension. “It was good to see you too. If you need anything— anything at all— don’t be afraid to floo me. I’ll make sure to find a replacement at work so that you can take several paid months off to help Zala, and I’ll be including an extra bonus as another present.”

Thorfinn thanked him. They said other formal pleasantries to signal a goodbye, but it remained strained as they walked away to apparate near the gate.

Titus leaned close. “What did you talk about with Thorfinn?”

“Just his daughter. He seemed very tired.”

Titus didn’t press for more as they reached the gate.

Before apparating, Hermione glanced back.

Thorfinn met her stare, eyes widened, as if he’d been fatally shot by an arrow and just now sensed an impending doom. He glanced down at his daughter and then back at her again in horror— as if he’d seen a ghost in the harsh daylight.

As if he finally saw the ugly truth.

Curling his baby protectively closer to his chest, Thorfinn’s expression once again turned to stone as he went back into his castle and closed the door.

---

I was gifted three amazing art pieces!! One was given by Sunce of a beautiful young Hermione. I plan to display it on one of the earlier chapters once I get the art back on a better hosting site. There's no easy way to link it, but I can't wait to show it off. The second was created by mira.sool\_art and you can see it [HERE](#). It showcases the scene of Hermione and Draco embracing in the ministry cells. It conveys the emotion of the scene perfectly. The third was created by Ivmaruva. You can see it [HERE](#). The art is of The Butcher, and the shadow of a mask on his face was such a brilliant, chilling addition. Thank you all for your support!

# Chapter 51: Playing Pretend

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion: VOILÀ- “Figure You Out” (best Draco song)  
And Lil Peep- “Save that Shit”

A big thank you to my alpha group and my beta, MyPrivateInsanity, for making this chapter 100% better!!

Previously on House Pet: Titus' obsession with capturing the Reaper is growing as he creates a plan to trap him at Yaxley's club, the Red Room. With Luna Lovegood's help, Hermione intends to collect all of the ingredients for a rare, dark potion. All the while, she follows Angel's advice, attempting to manipulate Titus and others for her gain, even if it's against her nature.

However, Titus is playing mind games of his own, trying to slowly seduce her: gifting her dates to go on adventures, a job in his office at the ministry, and fwooper feather quills used to spy on her activities. Each day, he takes more and more from her, and Hermione grows desperate to be back with Draco and escape Nott Manor.

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

## Playing Pretend

Hermione woke in the hazy light of dawn with Titus' hand resting along her stomach.

The evening prior, Titus had given her a cup of her favourite Earl Grey while reading in front of the fireplace. Though it was a normal action for him, she'd discovered this particular brew had been spiked with the potion meant to sever her from Draco.

She'd finished it without showing any concern, knowing it wouldn't have any effect.

Having nothing else to do, Hermione watched the fading night through the window, the world slowly brightening. Making sure Titus remained asleep, she extracted a crinkled wrapper hidden in her pocket, containing a single chocolate. Without hesitation, she shoved the sweet in her mouth and pretended to go back asleep.

Draco had sent through the Fever Fudge a few days before— a prototype from the Weasley twins. Harry had warned him that it might not work. There was a solid chance she'd turn purple or grow fins, but she had to risk it. Without magic at her disposal, she possessed no other way to fake an illness.

The fever began soon after swallowing, just as the twins promised. Though it didn't make her feel as ill as a real virus, it heated her forehead, and she twisted around in discomfort.

An hour later, Titus finally opened his eyes, gathering her in closer for a hug.

“Morning—” he pulled back, brows furrowing, placing a cool hand along her brow. “You’re burning up.” For a fraction of a moment, she spied relief, a sharp drop in his shoulders, before he quickly disguised the action with concern.

“I don’t feel so good.”

“You must have caught the cold going around the ministry.” Titus kissed the top of her head. “I’ll take off work. Let me go grab a dreamless sleep. When you wake again, Eddy can make some soup. Do you want me to call a healer?”

He only offered a healer to continue his own ruse.

“Don’t bother,” she interrupted, giving a snuffle. A healer would see through her acting. “What could they do that Bitty couldn’t? I’ll probably be better by tonight.”

According to Draco, the fever from the potion would only last a day or less, which is just as long as the chocolate should last.

Hermione made herself comfortable in Titus’ large bed, knowing she’d need to stay there the rest of the day, whether she felt like it or not.

Titus walked back in and sat on the edge of the mattress, brushing her sticky curls from her face, helping her swallow the potion he’d brought with some water. Then he placed a cooling charm on a hand towel and draped it along her forehead. “You’ll feel much better after some rest.”

---

The day after her fever broke, Luna watched over her shoulder in the treehouse as she placed two vials of bubotuber pus inside the expanded cauldron to store it for later.

The bubotuber pus had been the riskiest item to obtain so far, but Luna had managed to walk through the floo without suspicion from the Goyles or the elves, tiny vials of plant goo dangling from her ears.

Hermione placed her finger on the list of ingredients, whispering out loud: “sulphur water, Acromantula venom, and silver-eyed Horned Toad slime.”

Out of the three items left, she only needed one to start the slow simmering base.

“Do you have access to any sulphur water?” Hermione glanced up at Luna.

“I don’t think so.”

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead in frustration. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

As she shrank the cauldron, she tried to think of a route to obtain it.

Any form of water proved impossible to transfer through the bag; they'd attempted it long ago. And she couldn't guarantee when she'd see Draco again, especially since Titus had become more deranged with her safety since the recent Reaper attacks. He was now keeping her home when not at work, despite his promises, and had cut her hours at the ministry to only three days a week.

It made her antsy to do something important.

"I don't know of anywhere I could get—" Hermione paused, remembering a box of white envelopes. Last week, she'd done as Titus had asked and opened each pre-planned date to choose which location she desired to visit first.

Hermione now knew exactly which destination she'd pick.

---

Titus stood near the floo on Saturday, pulling a cloak over an outfit slightly more formal than his daily wear at home. She chose a dress suited for the cold of late February, long-sleeved and conservative, wearing the new hat he'd given her for Christmas.

"You look lovely." He grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles.

"Thank you." She played along, knowing that today Titus would pretend to be the perfect gentleman. "Now let's go."

"Eager, are you?"

She let her natural curiosity and excitement take over. It wasn't too difficult of a task, because seeing new places appealed to her, even if her overbearing warden tagged along. "I've never been to Bath."

Besides a single room in the The Royal Crescent while spiriting Julie away, at least.

"I promise you'll love it."

She rubbed her hands together as they stepped into the fireplace, arriving in an old Abbey where they'd constructed a reciprocal floo recently. She explored the cathedral first, admiring the art and the structure, while he trailed patiently behind her, indulging her whims. The graceful arched ceiling, the impressive stained glass, even the old pews remained in the same state as pre-curse England. The wizards hadn't gutted it for their own use yet, demolishing the symbols of religion like they'd done with many of the others.

Hermione didn't know how to delicately ask what she wished. "It's so—"

"Preserved?" he finished, clasping his hands behind his back. "Most of the historical buildings had been ruined during the chaos following the curse. But the ones that weren't, I petitioned to protect."

"Why?"



“Muggles are capable of creating beauty.” He stared at a stained-glass panel. “Even I can see that. Destroying this would be like destroying the old Roman ruins— incomprehensible. I’ve tried to keep the best of the muggle art I’ve found too. Much of it has been relocated to the muggle history museum, under constant guard from thieves.”

Much like when she discovered that he helped the orphans after killing their parents, Hermione didn’t know how to process the dichotomy of his actions. Titus enslaved muggles, viewed them as a mass of insects he couldn’t eradicate because wizards needed them, yet revered their art and architecture enough to protect it from thieves.

The leaps in logic confused her, and it made her dreadfully sad in a separate way from the rotting ruins of the other muggle cities. “I think I’ve seen enough of the Abbey.”

“There’s much more to explore.” Titus led her outside where snow covered the ground in a thin, icy layer.

They wandered the streets at a slow pace, shoes crunching along the pavement, only stopping to listen to a man play an instrument in a square. He brought her to a nearby restaurant with a striped awning. A few wizards populated the lower levels. Attached to the bottom of the staircase a sign read: MUGGLE SECTION SECOND FLOOR.

“Muggles live in Bath?” she asked.

“Only some of the useful ones. It’s far more integrated here than London, but we still try to maintain separate spaces.”

Hermione withheld the instinctive curl of her lip that would reveal her disgust. The Order never made their muggle counterparts eat separately as if they carried dragon pox. She did her best to bury her invasive questions as a nervous waiter led them to the single table in the private temperature-controlled garden in the back, brightened by electric string lights. The magical flowers bloomed even in February, and she allowed herself to admire the beauty, leaning over to sniff at a never-dying rose.

“What do they serve here?” she asked after taking her seat.

“A dish called pizza. It’s mostly a muggle invention, though Italian wizards try to claim it as their own creation. I think you’ll really like it. It might be my favourite.”

Eddy tended to only cook traditional British food, which is what he excelled at. However, Draco had already surprised her with pizza a year prior.

She wouldn’t tell Titus that though. Why ruin his desire to show her new things?

When the waiter brought the circular, flat pie, he set it down in the center of the table. Steam curled in the chilled air, and the mouthwatering scent overtook the flowers.

She studied the dish. “That much cheese can’t be healthy.”

“Definitely not. That’s the fun of it.” Titus picked up his own slice, cheese oozing off, and showed her how to eat it.

When the pizza touched her tongue, she rolled her eyes up in pleasure and didn't have to fake the groan. "Bloody hell, that's good."

Titus never broke his intense stare as they consumed the rest of the pizza, as if he experienced satisfaction just from observing her.

After dinner, he grabbed her hand as they walked through the low-lit streets, the pale buildings glowing in the light of the street lamps.

Much like many ancient ruins, including Stonehenge, the Roman Baths remained covered with a permanent glamour, placed there a century ago after excavation and renovation to the original structure.

Old wizards with long beards exited as they entered, skin pink from heat. They gave nods of respect to Titus as they passed, but he ignored them, eyes still trained on her, as she wandered the old rooms: ancient massage parlours, changing rooms, even a gymnasium.

The only spaces still in use were the main pools. The original roof had never been rebuilt by wizards. In its place, an open starry sky and several statues on a terrace above overlooked the thermal bath. From what she'd read, the water appeared poisoned with lead to the muggles, but the wizards kept it as clean as it had been thousands of years ago.

Steam curled out of the naturally heated water; the sulphurous rotten egg smell masked with a charm.

"It's amaz—" her sentence cut off as Titus unbuckled his belt and opened the top button of his trousers. "What are you doing?"

"You didn't think I'd come to a Roman Bath and not partake?"

"But other people could see you." She instantly regretted her choice of date location, cheeks as hot as the water, and she turned away just as he peeled his trousers off, leaving only his trunks.

The water sloshed as he entered. "No one else is here, Sprite. I arranged it so that it would be only us."

Of course he had.

She shifted, not knowing what to do. How did she not notice they were alone, that the remaining wizards had filtered out long ago? It made the date feel far too intimate.

"Join me." Titus rested near the edge and splashed his face with the steamy water, slicking his hair back, before propping his elbows on the edge in a relaxed pose, displaying the impressive span of his chest.

Hermione hesitated, weighing the pros and cons.

What would Angel do?

That was easy enough to answer. She'd want her to use this opportunity to her fullest advantage, while also resisting him strategically.

"I don't have my bathing costume," she said.

"That didn't stop me. Come on, Sprite. It's just swimming."

"When in Rome, I suppose." Hermione fiddled with a button toward the top of her neck, thankful she wore a bra. "Don't look."

He rolled his eyes, but did as she asked, leaning his head against the stone behind him, face toward the heavens.

"No peeking," she reminded as she began unbuttoning until the fabric pooled along her hips and onto the ancient stone floor below, leaving her only in her bra and knickers.

After making sure the vial that she'd stashed in her knickers earlier that day remained in place and out of sight, she shivered in the low temperatures, and quickly stepped inside the Bath. Contrasting with the freezing air, the warmth was divine. The water only reached her waist, so she dipped down to hide most of her body, a haze of steam surrounding her.

"You can look now," she said.

He tilted his head down, eyes trailing over every visible feature in appreciation. "You look like one of the statues come to life."

Hermione glanced up at the grey carvings of Roman rulers, feeling as if they judged her, though it sparked her curiosity. "If we lived when the Romans first built this, do you think you would've been an emperor, a general, or a senator?"

She couldn't imagine him as a peasant in any lifetime. Nor could she see him as one of the idle rich.

"A general," he answered without consideration. "I wouldn't want to be Caesar. Too many cutthroats wanting your position. The only man who truly held power was the one with a loyal army behind him."

She supposed that was true. It was what made Titus so invaluable to Dolohov—loyal aurors and mercenaries following him.

"And who do you think I would've been?" she asked. "Besides a reanimated statue, of course?"

The heat curled up around his body as he searched for his answer. "You'd have been someone important too. Maybe a queen. My rival. The only woman a general could count as his equal. We'd have ruled together—just as we could today."

"And how would we have ever come into contact to fall in love if we were from opposite camps? Capturing me after a great battle, perhaps?"

“If I had to.”

A slightly psychotic fantasy, as all of his were. But she kept that opinion to herself.

“That’s a compelling story,” Hermione said. “But you don’t think of me as an equal, so it wouldn’t translate well to our time.”

“You really think that?”

“How could I not?” She raised her wrists, displaying her shackles.

“Come here.”

She didn’t want to breach the distance between them, especially since they only wore their unmentionables, but she’d already resisted enough by correcting him, so she swam within arm’s reach. “What do you—”

Titus dragged her closer, placing her knees on either side of his thighs. On instinct, she tried to push backward, but he held her firmly in place. She must look like a deer caught in a snare, frozen with nerves.

“I need you to understand something important.” Titus tapped the obsidian. “I wouldn’t bother putting shackles on someone I believed to be magically inferior to me. These show that I respect your ability. One day, they’ll be off. I promise you this. Because I don’t want to rule over you. I want you to be by my side *as an equal*.” He studied her, as if to crack some puzzle. “Hypothetically, since we’re speaking of ruling together, if you had the opportunity to change anything with the current laws, what would it be?”

Hermione weighed the wisdom of saying the truth. “Better treatment of muggleborns,” she admitted. “No abuse. No loaning them out to other people for sex. They need to be given more agency over their partners, lives, and magic. Muggles also need to be treated better.”

“Don’t you see,” he said, eyes soft. “We have the same goals. Muggleborns should be viewed as sacred. Treating them poorly, as many wizards have done, is counter productive and unnecessarily cruel. In my opinion, they should be worshipped for their ability to create life — as I’ll worship you.”

“Yet you’ve done nothing.” She bit her tongue afterward, unable to stop the rebuke.

“I’ve done more than you know. Stricter laws need to be put into place. We shouldn’t allow ourselves to behave like uncivilised muggles. We’re better than that. Soon I’ll be presenting some legislation in front of the Wizengamot, and I’d like you to help me draft it.”

Hermione blinked, but quickly rallied. “You’d let me do that?”

He reached up and touched the crystal on the universe necklace, then slid his palm along her jawline, his fingers in her hair. “I’d do anything for you.”

Such pretty words. But she didn’t believe them. He’d find a way to prevent her from truly contributing, though he’d create the illusion that she’d helped to placate her.

Hermione recognized the look he gave her with his eyes half closed and mouth slightly open. But he stopped, gaze flicking across her face, as if daring her to make the first move.

Pushing him away right now would hurt her progress, and she needed a distraction from her ultimate goal of the night.

And besides, she'd already kissed him before. What could it hurt? In fact, she'd kissed him her whole life, though admittedly not on his mouth.

*Breadcrumbs of affection.*

What she hadn't given him yet since her capture was *initiation* of affection, even for something as small as a kiss. It might provide the appearance of giving him something without truly giving him anything at all—doing the same thing he'd always attempted with her.

"Helping you draft the legislation would mean everything to me." Hermione forced her body to relax. She took in several short breaths and closed the gap, lips pressing against his pleasantly.

He groaned low with satisfaction, slipping the hand on her hip to her back, melding their bodies together.

Hermione had underestimated how intimate it would feel to be clutched to his chest. She gasped when her breasts, clad only in her thin bra, pressed against him. The middle of her thighs hugged his lower abdomen, and she wiggled just enough to reposition so he couldn't feel the hidden vial.

"I only want a kiss," he spoke against her lips, sensing her wariness. "We're in an ancient ruin after a lovely date, under the moonlight. Romantic enough that it would be a crime not to kiss you." By his smirk, she suspected he said that on purpose. A nod to her wishes in her diary. Romance, like in his mother's stories. But of course, she wasn't supposed to know he knew.

Hermione resisted the strong desire to roll her eyes. "I'm not sure—"

"Not everything has to be analysed. Tonight is meant to be enjoyed, though it's up to you how much or how far. You're in complete control of this."

Yes, she was in control, she reminded herself. More than he knew. This wouldn't be a kiss, but a calculated chess move. It meant nothing more than that. "Can we pretend something?"

"Why would we need to pretend?"

"Just for fun. I want to imagine I'm in a story right now. You'd be a knight." She tapped his chest over his heart. "Let's pretend you just saved me from a tower guarded by a dragon and a dark wizard, and I really want to show you how grateful I am to be saved." Her hands shook with nerves as she closed the distance again, letting their lips linger together in a chaste kiss.

Two could play the fantasy game. And the best part— he didn't know she played both sides.

He explored her in a slower, softer way than in the past, giving whispered groans that vibrated in his chest under her splayed fingers.

When his lips wandered to the sensitive area under her ear, gently pressing kisses soft as a butterfly down her neck, she tried to pull back.

“We only agreed to a kiss.”

“There are far more places to *kiss*.” His calloused hands slid along her rib cage.

She pinched his arm before he could go further, and he responded with a deep laugh. “I’m only teasing.”

“A kiss on the *mouth*, you utter wanker.”

Trust a Slytherin to manipulate a simple request to try to collect more than offered.

“You’re finally learning that you can command me.”

He gave her chaste kisses for several more minutes, finally twisting her to sit in his lap, trailing his fingers along the skin of her arms and hands while they viewed the statues and the endless frozen winter sky in comfortable silence.

Before leaving, he lifted himself out of the Bath, water trailing off his skin, and she took the opportunity while his back was turned to pull out the small vial she’d hidden in her knickers.

She only needed three drops, which she’d add at the same time as the crushed lavender, while turning clockwise five times.

Before exiting the pool, she uncapped the vial, scooped up some water, and slipped it back into the front of her knickers, completing her true objective for the night— collecting sulphur water.

---

Hermione created the base of the potion the next morning, using the knife, cutting board, and fire starter that Draco sent through. She worked on it on and off for two days in between shifts at the ministry. When it finally began to bubble, she shrank it, spelled to do so with a touch of her finger, knowing the charms embedded in the cauldron would keep the potion temperature controlled. All she needed to do now was wait. Deciding not to put all of her eggs in the same basket, she stashed it near the Badger statue in the East Garden away from the shrunk communication bag— both in areas outside that the elves never bothered to manage.

Since returning from Bath, Titus took every opportunity to kiss her: before sleep, waking up, leaving for work, or just because. He’d tug her into his lap, curl his fingers in her hair, and let his lips linger on hers until they tingled from the pressure.

Her nerves remained frayed as she was unable to stop him. After weeks and months of living without touch, her brain started to betray her, craving the gentle strokes of his hands on her face, the pressure of a hug, just to not feel so alone. The scent of cinnamon wove into her unconscious thoughts, her brain long ago associating it with comfort and safety, despite her knowing the feeling to be false.

Her sanity couldn't last much longer, close to snapping with the pull and tug of his physical manipulation.

Snapping into what she didn't know, but she thought it might resemble aggression. A violence simmering beneath the surface.

Her desire to be with Draco felt like a shard of glass embedded in her chest. Each time Titus touched her, it twisted again, lacerating important vessels. Her soul constantly bled, a slow trickle, leaving pieces of herself behind. Not enough to die, but enough to wither.

She remained in that suspended state of tolerant agony, only interrupted when Yaxley arrived through the floo again, his face pale, hands shaking. Titus received him, and both the men ignored her inquisitive stare as he led him back to his study.

When assured Titus had shut the door, locking them inside, Hermione raced to her room, taking out the listening contraption that Lily had given her.

The voices crackled with the failing charms, and she struggled to hear. It took a moment for Hermione to orient herself and understand the subject matter of the conversation.

"Are you certain?" Titus asked.

"I'm certain. We've checked everything we could. Not even a whisper of him entering the club."

From what she'd gathered, the trap at the Red Room had occurred the day after he'd brought her to Bath, and like she'd hoped, after passing the information along, Draco hadn't attended or killed anyone else.

"However, we found a letter," Yaxley added, voice warbling with nerves. "Addressed to you. An audible one, I believe, though we haven't opened it."

"That's what you should have fucking started with."

"My girls found it on the south wall just this morning. "

"Give it to me."

The rustling of paper came first, followed by another silence, filled with tension, as Titus examined the note.

"There's no magical signature. No traps." He slid the tip of his wand under the envelope with a subtle rip. "And nothing dark attached that I can detect."

*“Tag,”* a gravelly voice echoed from the letter. *“You’re it. Catch me... if you can.”*

Goosebumps erupted along her arms, hearing Draco’s normal cutting sarcasm, even if his voice was changed enough no one else could identify it.

Titus balled the letter up with a crunch and tossed it to the side.

“He’s fucking taunting me.” The tapping of Titus’ wand began, the familiar beat of his lethal anger. “That’s a muggle saying. I’ve heard the children use it while playing. This is a joke to him, leaving that. He somehow recognized the polyjuiced girl with me wasn’t her. That’s why he didn’t show.”

Polyjuice? Hermione’s stomach dropped, knowing now that he’d used the potion to transform someone into her again for the Red Room. Did he touch her doppelgänger? Kiss her? Use her body for his pleasure? Her imagination conjured scenarios probably worse than what happened.

“Do you think he has inside information?” Yaxley asked.

“Possibly.” Tap, tap, tap. “Most likely.” And then the tapping stopped. “I want you to host another show this weekend. Just as extravagant as the last one.”

“But the cost—”

“I’ll fund it if I must. This time I’ll bring the real Hermione. It’s the last thing I wish to do, but I fear it’s the only thing that might work.”

“You think he’ll only show with her there? He probably knows it would be a trap.”

Titus gave a derisive scoff. “I know he will, even if it’s just to see her. Because as much as I hate his existence, we’re much alike in that aspect. Which means he’ll either be in plain sight, or he’ll find some way to hide himself.”

There was a shuffle as Yaxley stood. “I need to return to the club. It’ll take great effort to pull this off within such short notice.”

“I’ll make sure your efforts are rewarded, especially if it results in the apprehension of the suspect.”

Footsteps echoed on the wooden floor toward the door.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Titus said before his business partner could leave. “I’ll be hosting the monthly dinner on Beltane. It’s a... special event for me. I’ll need a few of your girls for entertainment. Classy ones. I don’t want filth in these corridors, so they’ll be dressed conservatively. A few singers, musicians, and a few to dance with the unmatched men in the room. Nothing more. It’s important that the night occurs without fault. No pranks, spiked punch, or improper behaviour. Nothing that could potentially upset my Hermione at all. So I’ll need your Whispers in the crowd to prevent such things.”

Hermione reared her head back at the undercurrent of what he said.



A dinner. At the manor. A *special* event.

“That won’t be a problem,” Yaxley said. “As always, it’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

Yaxley left, but Titus didn’t make a sound, indicating he’d stayed put. She kept the listening device in place.

The six-month mark loomed, which she’d worried about endlessly, though he’d never stated a specific cutoff. Now she understood that the first of May signalled the closest he’d allow them to get to the year mark.

Titus sat quietly for twenty minutes, and Hermione almost gave up in boredom, but a pop interrupted the silent wait. “Master Titus,” Bitty announced. “Mr. Parkinson is on the floo.”

“What does he want?”

“Mr. Parkinson is asking Master Titus about the pending investigation with young Dean.”

Titus groaned, as if fed up with the day and its demands. “Tell Parkinson that I’ll floo him back later. I have too many problems to sort through at the moment.”

“Right away, Master,” Bitty answered, followed closely by another pop.

Hermione stashed away the listening device and then stared out the window of her room. Her heart raced in distress, thinking of Dean.

Investigation?

Pansy must still not be pregnant. What would the ministry do? Was he in danger? No one ever really told her the details of what it entailed. She’d need to ask Draco later if he’d heard anything from Pansy, but the information might still be limited, since it seemed the investigation hadn’t started yet.

Hermione dug out her diary, freshly agitated, unwilling to pretend too much. She released her irritation with sharp strokes of her fwooper feather quill.

**Dear Diary,**

She made three paragraphs of inane details about her day, before getting to the interesting bits.

**The Roman Baths made me feel ancient. While swimming, I’d wondered if a woman long past had ever done the same thing. What did she think? What did she feel? Did she worry about similar things?**

**We kissed. On experiment, of course. It was nice to pretend to be inside a story where I couldn’t get hurt by the people around me. Unfortunately, I’m still not sure how I feel about anything.**

Hermione paused, feeling particularly vindictive, having been reminded of her friends, of Dean, and of everything he denied her while being trapped in a manor.

**If I was to be painfully honest, he tasted a bit like pizza, and his lips felt chapped. Still, I enjoyed the kiss, so I'd call the experiment a success, even if I hadn't solved the problem, and I'd like to continue my experiments. However, next time, I'll suggest we eat mints first.**

Everything was a lie. Titus' kisses were regrettably pleasant, and his breath always smelled of mint, but she enjoyed writing the rest of her diary entry with drivel, knowing that the criticism of the kiss would irritate Titus more than anything. It would burrow under his skin. And the best part—it wasn't anything he could discuss with her. He would just have to mull it over in his thoughts until he went mad.

Hermione slept well that night.

---

The next weekend Hermione discovered a box on her old bed containing a dress, similar to the ones she'd worn to the dinners, but this one was green.

Slytherin green.

Black beads wove across the fabric in a delicate pattern, showcasing a garden similar to the ones on the Nott grounds with gnomes and statues among the roses. The fairy sprites lit up as she moved, creating a soft twinkle. The fabric buzzed with embedded charms—protective ones, she believed. Similar to the ones he placed on his armour.

It gave her a brief pause, recognizing Titus' attempt to protect her in case arresting the Reaper turned deadly.

Hermione hated that she loved the dress's appearance, reminding her of the ones she used to pick out. The sleeves covered her arms, as was appropriate for winter, and the neckline went to the middle of her throat, but the hemline rested mid-thigh.

Though it felt short to her, she knew from experience that the rest of the crowd would be wearing far more revealing clothing.

After she'd finished getting ready, Titus appeared, leaning against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets. He looked dapper in a suit and tie, surprisingly more muggle than traditional. He'd slicked back his hair, but the ends disobeyed his charms, still curling at the ends against the nape of his neck.

“Look at you.” He grinned with pride, eyes sparking.

She twirled once to show off the beads.

“Where are we going?” She pretended ignorance of their destination. “Another date? I thought I was supposed to choose them? This seems more formal than the last time.”

He tensed for a fraction of a moment. “Not a date. Auror business. There’s a person in the crowd that I need to watch. We think he’s planning something illegal.”

She let herself show concern as she took his outstretched arm. “Anyone I know?”

“I don’t think so.” He gave her a quick kiss with noticeably minty breath. “It doesn’t matter. I just need a plus one, and I’m loath to bring anyone else but you.”

She pretended to just now realise something. “So I get to be a part of an official investigation?”

“Would you like that?”

“I think so. It’s a bit exciting. Like being a spy.”

He smothered a smile, as if he thought her answer adorable, and she glowered.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Of course not. You’ll be a fine spy.”

Her heels clicked along the corridor as he led her out of the room and to the front sitting room. “You never did tell me where we’re going.”

At the floo, he turned toward her, clenching his jaw once. “It’s called the Red Room.”

“That... sounds ominous.”

“Not truly. It’s just a club for people who have particular... desires. Fantasies. Though it also hosts various events.”

“Fantasies?” Hermione did her best to channel innocence. “Like sex?”

“Partially,” he said slowly as if not to frighten her, and she enjoyed watching him squirm. “Which is why I must warn you that you may see some things tonight that might make you uncomfortable. I won’t stop what’s happening, even if you ask. To soothe any fears, I’ve requested that the more extreme scenes are held in back rooms, away from the crowds.”

“I’ve seen sex before. I’m not sure why you’d think it would bother me.” She didn’t know if that was the right thing to say or not, since it brought up the undeniable fact that she’d been shagged senseless daily in Malfoy Manor.

“We’ll see.” He held out his arm. “Come, my little spy, the night is young.”

“Let’s catch a criminal.” She pretended to be excited at the prospect.

“Let’s,” he agreed.

They wouldn’t catch anyone.

Because she’d already told Draco to stay away.

Hermione let herself relax, intending to enjoy a night out of her cage, even if filled with debauchery.

## Chapter End Notes

I had to cut this chapter in half, because at 15K, it was way too long for me to easily edit. The second half is already in the final stages and will be posted VERY soon, possibly Sunday. So you technically get two chapters in one weekend!

Buckle your seatbelts lol.

# Chapter 52: The Red Room

## Chapter Notes

Song suggestion: Jessie Reyez- “Gatekeeper”

Black Atlass- “Pain and Pleasure”

Mags Duval- “Eye for an Eye”

A Big thank you to my beta, MyPrivateInsanity, and my alpha team for helping me tackle this beast of a chapter!

Trigger Warnings at the end:

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

## The Red Room

Hermione stepped into a formal floo reception room of the Red Room, Titus shortly behind, and a young man offered to take their cloaks. As they travelled down a long corridor with red carpet, the atmosphere darkened, wispy fog twining around their legs, only lit by torches with enchanted flames.

“What’s that smell?” Each time she took a breath, it changed. Something made of the earth. Not quite flowers. Musky. Possibly leather. She couldn’t quite pin it down. All she knew was that it smelled scrumptious.

“Pheromones,” Titus answered, voice still tight. “Only enough to set the mood. Not enough to influence anything.”

She wet her lips, suddenly apprehensive. The primal scent sparked along her nerves, ending deep in her belly. Not true arousal, but almost as if primed for it.

Music thumped behind a set of double doors, a steady beat that mimicked her racing heart.

“Remember what I told you,” he whispered. “Every person on that stage and in the crowds chose to be here. The women can turn down the more extreme offers if they wish, but they’re paid well enough that not many of them do. Even if people look as if they’re being hurt, it’s consensual.”

That *did* sound ominous.

“Do you anticipate I’ll enjoy it?”

“I’m not sure.” His eyes flicked across her face. “Maybe you’ll surprise me.”

Titus waved another attendant away and opened the ornate door himself, leading her forward with his hand lingering on the small of her back.

Music washed over her. On the stage, women in only their thin knickers, breasts exposed, twirled upside down on poles.

The ceilings hung low, creating an environment that appeared intimate. The deeper they walked into the room, the more it dimmed, walls painted red, reminding her of blood. The low ceilings must have been an illusion, because there were many levels to the giant room, like a maze, each with a table almost hidden from view, giving a sense of privacy.

Hermione glimpsed at the secluded sections with growing unease as she passed.

In one of them, three men, including a Wizengamot member, sat around a table while smoking cigars, each with their trousers undone, and a naked woman on their knees in front of them, heads moving. The men carried on a conversation while smoking and drinking whiskey as if nothing unusual was happening.

Though she’d seen something similar at the first dinner, it still shocked her to witness the act displayed so openly.

Titus noticed what she looked at and pulled her closer. “If it disturbs you too much, I can bring you home. Of course, then you wouldn’t be much of a spy.”

Titus bluffed. He’d never bring her home. Not when he thought he might catch the Reaper. Not when he’d spent so much money on a dress embedded with protection charms.

“I’m fine.”

“If you say so.” He raised an eyebrow.

After that, she did her best not to look too closely at the secluded areas as she passed, not having any desire to see random wizards in compromising positions.

But it became impossible to ignore. In one, a naked woman lay prone on a table with various pieces of food displayed along her curves— a living charcuterie board. She remained so still that Hermione thought she might be petrified. The group of people standing around her, both men and women, plucked food off the body, grabbing and licking it off her flesh when and where they wished.

At another table, two women were tied up with Incarcerous spells, ropes wrapped so tightly around naked flesh that the skin turned purple. Another woman hung suspended from the ceiling, with her legs splayed open to an uncomfortable degree as a man inserted—

Titus shuttled her away before she could see more, and he pushed her quickly past another table with various whips, chains, and a shackled woman. The skin on her arse looked red and raw. Hermione craned her neck to see more, overcome with morbid curiosity, but Titus set a faster pace.

Yaxley finally appeared, arms spread in welcome, dressed in ornate red robes. “Titus Nott,” he bellowed, wanting others to hear. “It’s an honour to have you in my club again. Let me show you to the VIP section.”

He brought them to an area so close to the stage that she could see every curve and body part of the women as they flipped and twirled, wrapping legs around metal to hold themselves in impossible positions— all without magic.

Hermione made an audible noise of displeasure after arriving, seeing people already occupying the table intended for them. Nera sat at the far end, sans Filibus, along with the younger Rosier, who had the Weasley girl perched on his lap, and two others she recognized as aurors in Titus’ top command.

“I thought it would be just us!” she glared at him.

“I could tell Yaxley you’d prefer for us to have more privacy,” Titus’ voice turned lower, raising an eyebrow, as if daring her to take the offer. “I think I might prefer that as well.”

A choice: brave the repulsive table occupants or find another one more private. With the pheromones, an intimate environment might be too much.

Hating every step, she forced herself to walk forward and steal an available chair before Titus could pull her into his lap like the last time.

“Rosier,” Titus greeted in an icy tone, gracefully taking his seat beside her. “And Nera.”

“How nice of you to join us, Nott.” The Veela’s sharp eyes flashed like a predator in the night. “Will your naughty breeder be our shared entertainment tonight? I’ve been dying to try her.”

“I’m not in the mood for your provocations today,” Titus warned.

Nera grabbed a wine glass and leaned back in her seat, watching the stage with the same predatory gleam. “Always so serious. You’re never any fun.”

A waiter stepped from the shadows, and Titus ordered their drinks without input from her. He kept a heavy hand on her thigh as he leaned forward to talk to Rosier in hushed whispers, tracing the beads near the hemline in slow movements she found distracting.

Far too sober for the night, Hermione waited for the alcohol to arrive to numb the discomfort, her hands fidgeting in her lap in the interim. As if sensing her nervousness, Ginny gave a kiss to Rosier’s cheek and slid off his lap to sit in the chair beside Hermione. Bright red hair fell over her shoulder like a waterfall while searching her face.

“Hello,” Hermione said, experiencing the odd sensation of déjà vu again.

“Hello,” Ginny answered. “The dancers are talented. Don’t you think so?”

The women on the stage accomplished impressive acrobatics, completely naked now besides a sheer fabric attached to their hips, showing off their toned, lean bodies, each with a magical

tattoo of a number glowing red on their lower stomach. Impressively, all three girls managed to do the same routine at the same speed.

It reminded Hermione of the ballerina painting. A darker, truer version— a performance meant to be consumed. “Very talented.”

Again, Ginny stared at her in a way that began to unnerve her.

“What?” Hermione snapped, on edge.

“I just feel like we’ve met before. Though I can’t quite remember where.”

“You do look familiar. I assume it was at Diagon Alley one time? Or maybe at Hogwarts?”

“Yes... Diagon Alley. Sorry, I’ve been forgetting a lot lately. Evan tells me that it’s from a head injury, and that I shouldn’t let it frustrate me. Sometimes I almost remember things, but then I forget them again.”

“How long have you been with him?”

“I’m not sure.” Her brow furrowed. “I can’t remember that either. All I know is that I’d been kidnapped by criminals. He found me in their tunnels and saved me from them. And I’m so grateful he did, because we love each other now. Or at least, I think we might. He proposed to me a few weeks ago, even though I can’t give him children.” She showed her hand topped with a massive diamond ring. “Pretty soon, I’ll be his wife.”

For some reason, the hairs along her neck stood up, sensing something terribly wrong with her story. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” She placed a hand to her head as if it hurt. “I think.”

The waiter arrived with the wine. As soon as Titus gave her the goblet, she drank half of it in three large gulps.

Titus tapped her thigh, a little bit higher than before. “We have all night. There’s no need to get sloshed.”

Hermione took another sip, this time slower. “Getting sloshed sounds great to me.”

Ginny crawled back in Rosier’s lap, giggling while he whispered to her, kissing her neck, leaving Hermione alone, fussing with her napkin.

The hair along her arms and the nape of her neck stayed raised, the nerves pulled tight. Her face flushed, and the music thumped along her skin as a separate pulse.

A subtle euphoria swirled in her veins as the dancers exited the stage, replaced by a stunning woman who slowly stripped her clothes in strangely funny, tantalising movements while singing. The performance affected Hermione, squirming in her seat, watching the woman peel away one item and then another, revealing bronze skin as she went, until she got a glimpse of her inner thighs. Her breasts. Her arse.



Finally finished with whatever conversation he seemed to be having, Titus glanced askew, studying her. “Enjoying this?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it. What type of dance is she doing?”

“Burlesque. It’s only meant to tease.”

“Why does she have a number attached to her skirt?”

He hesitated, but only for a moment. “It’s so the men who are interested can... request her if they want.”

*Buy her* is truly what he meant.

“Oh.” That should have cooled the tension scraping down her spine, but the throbbing in her stomach concentrated at the soft center of her thighs.

It was the intensity that tipped her off— the overwhelming heat. The sensations tingled across her skin, unable to be stopped or controlled.

Long ago, she’d experienced the exact same sensation, though it seemed to be far less acute than the last time.

Hermione set her empty goblet down, glaring at it, feeling ill and agitated.

The wine had been spiked.

The aphrodisiac churned inside her. Her eyes glanced around in panic, wondering who had given it to her. Was it a normal part of the night?

Did Titus spike it?

She met his stare, finding him still looking at her rather than watching the stage or talking to others.

“Are you okay?” he asked,

No, Hermione decided. Titus might force her to do many things, but drugging her with an aphrodisiac at a sex club was low, even for him.

Her eyes flicked around the table, bypassing Rosier and Ginny.

“Where’s Nera?” she asked, noticing the empty seat.

“She went off to find a lover for the night, using one of the back rooms.”

Even with the aphrodisiac pounding through her system, her mind worked well enough to pull back in confusion. “I thought she was with Walter Filibus.”

“She is.”

“Wouldn’t he be angry that she’s with someone else?”

He grinned at her again, teeth glowing in the dim light, as if once again finding her innocence endearing. “Nera and Filibus sleep with each other, but it’s more of a business relationship. She’s talented in ways that benefit his position, and in return, he provides her with legal protection.”

Normally, Hermione would be able to read through the lines, sensing something important. But the drug enticed her to rub her hands down her skin, pressing hard at places that were beginning to ache. Denying herself that simple instinct managed to be close to torture.

“You’re very wiggly.”

Hermione tried to control her breathing. “I need to go to the loo.”

---

Titus waited at the entrance of the loo as she barreled through, slamming the door behind her, running toward the nearest stall. She resisted touching herself like she desperately wanted, afraid that if she started to orgasm, she wouldn’t want to stop.

If it was anything like the last time, it wouldn’t give her any relief anyway.

No, she needed to control it.

She could do this. Hermione went to the sink and then froze, noticing a familiar figure washing her hands in a sink beside her.

“Angel,” she said, feeling wary. “Do you live in loos, just waiting for unsuspecting witches?”

“Today is dangerous.” Angel didn’t acknowledge her sarcasm. “For all of us.”

The music outside beat so loud she felt it in her skull, but just in case, Hermione left the water running to help drown out any sounds. “Why?”

Angel sneered at her. “This place is crawling with aurors. Even more than the last time.”

The Whispers—Hermione had a hunch that Angel centered herself in its web, controlling information from both sides. Dangerous, for a muggle. But ingenious, because no one would suspect her. Probably not even Titus. His prejudice got in the way.

Another thought hurtled into her. Something horrid. She gripped the porcelain, closing her eyes. “You were the one who spiked my wine.”

“I need you to distract the Butcher,” Angel confirmed without an apology. As if she’d done nothing at all. “And that would be easier if you loosened up.”

“You fucking bitch!” Hermione held up both hands as if to wrap them around her dainty throat and throttle her.

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s only half as strong as normal. You’ll be able to function. All it takes to get rid of it is body heat getting you off a time or two. Otherwise, it should only last a day or so.”

A day or so! Hermione felt woozy. Black spots invaded her vision. How could she endure this torture for an entire day?

Hermione tried to get a hold of herself and the conversation. “What’s so dangerous about tonight?”

“The Butcher brought the Veela this time, and she’s on the prowl. Most of my girls aren’t involved in anything, so they’re safe, but some— well, the potions to resist a Veela’s charm are too expensive to give to everyone.”

Hermione straightened. “He brought Nera on purpose.”

“He doesn’t normally involve her in investigations. Her prices are exorbitant, and they don’t get along, but the Veela has a knack for extracting information where others fail. I’m not sure if I can protect all of my girls.” Angel narrowed her eyes, as if it was Nera who stood before her and not a shackled muggleborn. “But that’s my concern. Not yours. Tonight your only job is to keep the Butcher’s eyes on you.”

She understood the gravity. People might die tonight. “I’ll try.”

“Good.”

“But I want a promise.”

“Go on.”

“We’ll be hosting a dinner at Nott Manor on Beltane. Titus wants that night to be when we finally consummate. Draco bound me to him on Samhain. Beltane is heavy with magic, which would be the best time to counteract it. I need you to get me out before then like you promised.”

Hermione found it hard to read Angel’s expression, eyes piercing into her in a calculating way.

“You’ve been very useful,” she said, uncrossing her arms.

“Is that a yes?”

“The information you’ve obtained, along with the efforts of the young Malfoy, have helped us protect several bases, install spies, as well as counter some attacks with our own. Unfortunately, you’ve proven to be *too* useful. Almost... indispensable.”

Even bathed in warm air, cold seeped past Hermione’s skin. She blinked a few times, trying to understand. “You’re not going to help me escape?”

“Don’t be upset. It’s not personal. The Dog got angry too, but he didn’t have much of a choice without my involvement. Sometimes decisions in leadership can be painful and immoral, especially in a world like this. Right now, the little doll is most valuable beside the Butcher.”

The Dog?

Sirius, she suspected. The conclusion hurt more than she wanted to allow, stinging like betrayal.

Neither the Order nor Angel had ever planned to help her at all. They’d lied and convinced her to play her part, syphoning information for them at the cost of herself.

What a little fool she’d been, trusting them.

Well, two could play this game.

“If you don’t help me get out, I’ll never give you a single piece of information ever again. In fact, I possess Information I think Titus would find *very* interesting. I promise you— just for spite— I’ll burn everything to the ground that you’ve worked so hard to protect.”

“You could,” Angel answered her threat without a flinch. “But then I’d tell the Butcher about your loverboy. I wonder how he’d react knowing Draco Malfoy is still fucking his precious Sprite behind his back. Not very well, I imagine.”

Hermione’s hands clenched by her side, so that she wouldn’t resort to violence.

“The Dog doesn’t want to keep you in chains, doll,” Angel said in a honeyed voice. “I’ll let him retrieve you eventually. But the time isn’t right.”

“When would it be fucking right?” She’d attempted to sound strong, but her voice warbled.

“A year. Maybe two. That’s all that’s needed. You’ll earn your favours just like everyone else.”

The floor dropped out underneath her. She grabbed the sink again for balance.

No. No. No. She couldn’t.

“He’s not going to wait any longer than Beltane. He wouldn’t risk losing me.”

“Jesus Christ, then fuck the butcher.” The look Angel gave her was pure disgust. “Out of all the dirty jobs in the world, it’s not the worst. He’ll be even more willing to spill secrets with his cock buried deep inside you. A happy man in a position of power is a foolish man.”

“But Draco—”

“Will understand. If he loves you *so much*, like you say, then he’ll recognize that you’re stuck. Do as other smart women have done in your situation for centuries, queens and consorts both.”

“And what’s that?” Hermione realised she was trembling.

“Fuck your master for power, and then fuck your paramour for love. Best of both worlds. It’s a delicate balance and possesses its own dangers, but I think you’ll do just fine.”

She wouldn’t survive a full two years or more of that duplicity. Not if she entered Titus’ bed. He’d discover who truly controlled her fertility, and then he’d work to sever it in a real way.

Though she feared the dynamic change if she allowed him what he wanted, it wasn’t what scared her the most. He could take from her body, and she’d ensure it wouldn’t mean anything.

But if he coerced her into getting pregnant, like Lily warned not to let happen, then she might as well get used to the cage, because she’d be trapped. Titus would use their child as a bargaining chip for the rest of her life.

As if sensing she neared some mental breaking point, Angel clicked her tongue. “Cheer up. We’re on the same side. Destroying the Death Eaters is far more important than anything else.” Her expression grew hard. “*Anything*. Especially your feelings. When they finally topple, we can rebuild this society into something better.”

“I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“You’ve no idea how many times I’ve heard that line from so many women just like you. Scared. Young. Vulnerable.” She gave a fake sympathetic click of her tongue. “But you *will* do it. Just like they did.”

The woman walked to a far stall and entered, blowing her a mocking kiss. “When you’re finally over your little tantrum, you know where to find me. If you ask nicely, I’ll teach you how to suck the Butcher’s cock so well that he’d deliver your enemy’s head on a platter.”

Hermione watched her disappear, feeling disconnected from reality. Like she watched everything through the lens of a dream. Stuck in layers of the underworld.

She glared at her reflection. Dark circles smudged under her eyes, skin paler than normal, beyond the pink blotches on her cheeks and neck, as if sucked of vitality. She gripped the sink with both hands, giving a muted scream under her breath.

---

When Titus brought her back to the table, Nera hadn’t returned yet, and Ginny and Rosier were gone too, leaving Titus and her alone.

He placed his hand against her cheek. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’m just cold.” She didn’t know how to disguise her shock. All her hope smashed with a single conversation. The plans she’d made with Draco were buried under fear. The manipulations she’d sacrificed her pride for— everything seemed futile.

Titus sent a warming charm. It shook her out of her stupor as the heat reignited the aphrodisiac into something painful, burning across her skin. She rubbed her thighs together again, wishing for some friction, wishing to run her hand down along her curves.

“Thank you.”

“I hate to leave you here.” Titus reached out and squeezed her hand. “But I have to go check something. Don’t get up.”

Hermione huffed in exasperation. “I have no desire to wander this depraved sex club.”

He studied her to see if she was serious before leaving.

Hermione fiddled with a napkin again, grateful to be alone for a moment to process her emotions.

Until a touch of fingers to her neck jolted her upright. She tried to hide the surprise by reaching forward for her empty wine glass.

Someone invisible stood behind her.

The fingers felt too solid and too real to be anything but human, calloused and large enough that it suggested a man who’d worked outside or played quidditch.

She knew those fingers. Had memorised the feel of them trailing across every sensitive part of her body.

“Draco,” she whispered like a prayer. She didn’t turn to acknowledge him. “You promised you’d stay away.”

“I couldn’t.” Soft lips brushed under her ear, lingering. She melted into the sensation. “You know I couldn’t. I needed to see you. To touch you. I’m sick without you.”

The totality of his invisibility suggested a magical object— one she’d seen before.

“Harry let you use his cloak again.” She knew he’d been in contact with Harry, but she was still surprised.

“We have similar goals. I’m here for two reasons.”

She didn’t ask the particulars as anger bloomed in her stomach. She’d only been confident to come to the Red Room because she’d believed she didn’t have to fear for his safety. “Titus might catch you.”

“He won’t.”

Always so confident, though it did solve an immediate problem. “I was given an aphrodisiac. It doesn’t seem as strong as the one Montague spiked the punch with, but— I might need you to help me with it. Right now. Because it’s starting to become unmanageable.”

His fingers tensed along her throat. She imagined his eyes flashing red with rage. “Who?”

“A ghost.”

His fingers loosened. “If it doesn’t feel that strong, then it’s probably a different variation than last time.”

“How many variations exist?”

“Several.”

“I think this one only needs separate body heat than me. Possibly, a single orgasm.”

“Then let me help you get rid of it.” The fingers on her neck slid down her throat. Past her breasts that ached to be squeezed, sucked, and nipped. Lower. Lower. Past her belly button, until he discreetly slipped up the low hemline of her dress.

“I want you to leave after this, okay?” she pleaded.

“Spread your legs just a little—” He didn’t address her concerns. “You need to be silent. No reaction.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.” She still twisted the napkin in her fingers to ground herself.

“Then look at the stage and pretend you’re aroused by the performance.”

That wouldn’t be too hard of a task. Everything aroused her. Even just looking at a person made her imagine how they’d fuck her.

Two dancers had replaced the last one. Except this time, they scandalously touched each other while performing.

How would two women fuck? She’d never thought of it before. With their tongues? A hand clenched inside? Perhaps rubbing against each other? Her imagination stopped there; it was far past her scope of experience.

But she supposed she might find out. The women on stage began to stroke and kiss each other, while moving in circles, getting more intimate as the song continued.

Draco pushed her silk knickers to the side. She was so wet, her body welcomed him as he pressed inside her, curling his fingers at the right spot. She gripped the table for balance, unable to stop a moan of instant relief.

“You feel so good,” he rasped in her ear.

The women on stage discarded their bras and then their knickers, exposing themselves with high kicks of their legs.

Her thoughts, addled by the drug, conjured images she’d never considered before.

A haze of flesh twisted her desire. Primed with pheromones and an aphrodisiac, and tormented by her fabricated lust, she orgasmed faster than she ever had before. Hermione seized hard against his hand, grabbing his wrist to press his fingers even further inside her, keeping it in place with frantic rocks of her hips, riding the intense wave of pleasure until completed.

Hermione slumped forward, sucked of energy, panting for a moment. But she didn't have long to recover, because a familiar figure marched toward them.

"Fuck," she whispered. "Titus is back."

Draco's hands left her knickers like she burned, and she pulled back her hand that had been on top of his, hoping it looked like she was merely touching herself. She'd endure embarrassment if it meant keeping Draco hidden.

"Your heart rate increased," Titus' voice stabbed through her when he reached the table. "I thought I'd find you upset." He eyed her up and down in irritation, angry that he had to interrupt whatever he was doing to check on her. His expression slowly returned to normal, viewing her flushed cheeks with a raised eyebrow. Then he gave a knowing, wicked smirk.

"I was—" her face must be bright red. "I mean, I was just looking—"

"So what has my Sprite been thinking about that has her so aroused she's touching herself in a public place again?" Titus glanced back at the stage, where one of the women perched on the edge of a chair, while the other kneeled in a compromising position between her thighs.

"I wasn't thinking of anything." Her face burned brighter, trying not to look at the stage where the acts became shocking.

Though slightly satiated, the desire still tingled under her skin. A single orgasm hadn't solved it like she'd hoped.

"Tell me the truth, love. There's no reason to evade the question." Titus looked amused as he sat, pulling her into his lap, facing him. Her dress pooled around her hips, and her knickers brushed against the hard parts of his armour under his clothes. She shivered, repressing the instinct to rock her hips, desire already growing to a boiling point again. "Before you tell me anything, you should know that I wouldn't share you with a woman either, even if you desire one. You're mine and only mine, but we could play with any other fantasy."

"I don't desire women. I just—" She couldn't explain the drug's influence.

Her hips moved just a fraction on accident, and a dark thrill zipped down her spine, completely out of her control, driven by the drug.

"Liar. Something's making you wet. I can feel how soaked your knickers are through my clothes."

Hermione clutched his shoulders so hard she might have broken a nail. Becoming dizzy with repressed need, she leaned her head down on his shoulder, shivering against him



“Oh, don’t be embarrassed.” He stroked her back, making it worse.

Her gaze snapped up, finding Draco’s red eyes glowing back at her, peeking out from under his hood. The charm on his hands had started to vanish, showing the pulsing dark veins as he pointed his wand at Titus’ head.

If he killed Titus now, he might not make it out alive. And she might not either. Too many aurors surrounded them.

The wand lowered slowly, as if he’d come to the same conclusion.

Taking a risk, he touched the side of her head where Titus couldn’t see, pulling her briefly into the library of her mind with a wispy version of him through projection.

Draco’s voice filtered into her mind. *Is the aphrodisiac gone?*

*Yes.* She lied.

*I don’t know if I can prevent myself from killing him.*

*No! Please go. It's too dangerous.*

*I have no choice but to leave, even though It’s like peeling off my skin. The apparition wards they’re setting up will snap into place soon. I took a single-use portkey from my father just in case I’m stuck, but after the last time, I can’t trust it won’t send me somewhere that might trap me, and it takes several minutes to activate. I need to leave.*

*Don't get caught. Remember, if you die, I die.*

*Then I won’t die.* The gentle touch left her cheek.

Titus kept hugging her and stroking the line of her spine, waiting patiently for her to get over her embarrassment.

Draco’s red eyes vanished again. One second. Two. Three. She couldn’t see him leave, but she sensed the absence of him by instinct.

After a tense thirty seconds, she collapsed further against Titus’ chest in relief. The slightest movement sent a rush of pleasure through her, and she didn’t bother stopping a moan.

“Are you upset?” he asked.

“I ache,” she admitted.

Titus’ hand stilled on her back.

“Look at me.” He forced her up, finally seeing her frenzied desperation. Pupils probably blown wide. Flushed cheeks. Trembling hands. In an experiment, he pulled her hips firmly against him, grinding against the hard parts of his hidden armour under his clothes.

“Oh fuck.” Stars burst behind her eyes, almost agony.

“Someone drugged you,” he said in a calm voice—the one he used when he was especially furious.

“I think so.”

“Do you know who?”

She thought fast. “Nera, I think.”

It seemed the right name to provide. “Sounds like something she'd do. Probably intended to throw another man in your presence, just to make me snap. Your judgement would've been compromised, and I would've killed him.” His eyes narrowed. “Is that why you touched yourself earlier?”

She nodded her head, probably looking sweaty and pathetic.

His expression softened. “Do you think you can withstand it for an hour more?”

She trembled. “I don't know.”

“Try to endure,” he said. “I have to be paying attention to the crowd, and I can't do that with you looking like this. It's too distracting.”

Her mind unravelled, triggered by the word distracting, knowing it to be important, but she couldn't think beyond the haze. Nothing seemed to matter beyond pulling something hard into herself repeatedly until she fractured.

“Please,” she said, hating the sound of her voice.

“You don't mean it.”

“It hurts.”

“I know it does.” He looked conflicted, and the hand on her spine lowered.

Giving into the drug again, she let her own hand lower down his chest to the buckle on his trousers.

“Let me touch you.”

“I can't,” he warned, voice low and rough. “You'll hate me even more than you already do.” But he didn't stop her, even lifted his hips as if on instinct, allowing her further access to slip her hand into his trousers.

She might have continued, led by the potion, but they were interrupted by Rosier and Ginny arriving back at the table. Titus shut his eyes tight a moment, before gently grabbing her hand, stopping her. “You're drugged. It's not real.”

Hermione groaned in desperation when he lifted her off his lap and settled her in the chair she'd been in before, as if to separate himself from temptation.

"Did you find anything?" Titus asked, clenching his hands once before stretching them out.

"Nothing," Rosier answered. Ginny sat beside him with her lipstick smeared and hair mussed. "There's no sign of any unwanted guests. None of the charms have been tripped."

Titus looked as if he wished to tap his wand to decompress. "That surprises me. The aurors must have missed something."

"Could it be that you're wrong?"

"No. He's here somewhere. We just need to force him to make an impulsive mistake."

Her potion-induced desire twisted with the fear for Draco, writhing like an agitated monster, provoking her magic. It buzzed along her wrists, pushing painfully against the cage of obsidian.

They talked in low voices as Hermione nearly crawled out of her skin, trying to think of anything besides getting back into Titus' lap. Just imagining him sliding into her, filling her completely had her—

"I caught the rat you wanted!" Nera's voice carried over the music, interrupting her filthy thoughts. The Veela held a struggling young woman with wide brown eyes and straight dark hair, wearing the skimpy outfit of one of the dancers. Nera flung the girl toward Titus' feet, almost slamming her into the table. "A young man who worked at the front sold her out. I barely had to charm him."

Taking out his gloves, Titus slowly pulled them on as he got up and walked toward the shivering girl. Another auror yanked her up, and Titus roughly grabbed her jaw with a cold glare. "I'd like to interrogate the young man too."

"Unfortunately, that would be impossible."

Titus' concentration broke a moment to send Nera a sneer. "You killed him?"

Nera wiped a trail of blood from her lip with a sharp grin, licking her fingers like a cat would a paw. "I couldn't resist a bite."

"This is why I never like working with you," Titus snapped. "I specifically said to keep all of the suspects alive. Why can't you ever follow a simple fucking command?"

"You just hate not having control over everything, don't you?" Nera collapsed in a chair nearby and gave Hermione a wink, showing she angered him on purpose. Playing games, like Titus had warned her about. "Besides, he didn't know anything else special. I saved you time."

"What did you learn about her?"

“The girl and the young man were lovers. Foolishly, she let her tongue slip a time or two.”

The dancer sobbed, trying to extricate herself from his iron grasp, when Titus’ attention went back to her.

“We’ll start simple,” he said. “Are you working for the Order?”

“Fuck you!”

“So young.” He examined her again. “Probably only eighteen. Because of your age, I’m more willing to forgive, knowing the Order can be manipulative. They’ve probably promised you things they never intend to fulfill.” Titus paused, allowing her fear to grow. “They don’t care if you live or die. *No one* cares. So save yourself. I’ll even offer you a deal. If you give me something useful, I’ll consider letting you live in a privileged section of the camps. Not much different from working in the club.”

The dancer spit in his face. “I’d rather die.”

Titus didn’t flinch, not even to wipe his face, as he tightened his grip to a severe degree. “You’ll change your mind.” He shoved her to another auror beside them. “Take the girl back to the ministry. Bring her to the lower levels. I’ll let her think about the offer for a few hours.”

The poor girl was bound, silenced, and dragged out of sight within a few moments of the command. Titus walked back and collapsed in the seat beside her, cleaning the spit from his face. He gave a hand signal to a nearby auror that Hermione couldn’t interpret. Whatever it was, the auror jumped into action along with several others.

The rest of the table occupants dispersed. Nera wandered off, and Rosier and Ginny disappeared, leaving them alone again.

“What?” Titus snapped.

“Do you often imprison young girls over hearsay?” She glared, shaken out of the haze, disturbed at what she’d witnessed.

“Protocol would be to use veritaserum, torture, and then tear through her mind with legilimency, leaving a catatonic shell. Would you prefer I do that?”

“No.”

“Then don’t lecture me on the ethics of my job. The safety of the country supersedes whatever concern you have. Given the defiance she showed me, I doubt she’s innocent of the charges.” He brushed his gloved knuckle along her cheek. “Trust me to be fair. I won’t be cruel to her. Besides, she’ll make the right decision. People always have a stronger survival instinct than they think they do.”

Hermione’s whole body vibrated with horror and sickened desire. “So what now? I thought we were spying?”

“The main suspect is nowhere to be found.”

“How long until we go home?”

“The club should close within the hour.” He stopped abruptly, body frozen, as if realising something. She could see the calculations in his hard stare, planning a strategy. “But he’s still here. I know he is. I refuse to go home without drawing him out.”

He turned toward her and slowly stood, looming over her. Hermione became wary from the sudden shift in mood, inching away from him, but there was nowhere to flee. “Maybe he’s not here. Like Rosier said.”

“No, he’s just hiding. Somewhere close by, I bet.” His mouth thinned in distaste. Whatever he planned, he didn’t seem to like it. “He just needs to be.... *provoked*.”

Hermione understood what Titus meant to do just as he lunged for her. She tried to leap away, but he was too fast and strong, dragging her onto the table, pushing her back down as gently as he could against the surface, stepping between her open legs. He had his wand clutched tightly with one hand, while holding her in place with his gloved fingers curled around the universe necklace.

“Don’t believe anything I say,” he leaned over her to whisper. “It’s not real. I’d never hurt you. All I need is for him to *think* it’s real.”

“Don’t—” He cut her off with a silencio.

“Disobeying me again?” Titus straightened, face transforming into harsh, cruel lines that she’d never seen before. “I wasn’t going to fuck you here, but if you want to act like a little whore, then I’ll show you what you are.”

He grabbed the bare skin of her legs, and the drug roared inside her. Her body tingled and throbbed as his gloved hands slid along her outer thighs, up under her dress, revealing her soaked knickers to his hungry gaze.

Though his fingers never pressed against what truly ached, she drowned in the darkness as he stroked her inner thigh, pretending to do much more. Rational thought ceased, lost in sensation. Nothing existed except hands rubbing, touching. She tried to fight against it, knowing something was wrong about it, but the drug controlled her. She arched into his touch, begging wordlessly for more.

“So sweet and all mine.” His hands went to his belt, as if to undo it. “Let’s show everyone how pretty you come on my—”

**Crack.** Titus deflected a spell with a sharp flick. The red light missed by a fraction, burning a trail along his cheek and slicing a spot in the wall behind his head.

“Get your fucking hands off her!”

**Crack.** Another red spell slammed against a blue protego that Titus conjured around them.

The room exploded into chaos before she could understand what had happened. Aurors stood, wands out. Titus shoved her out of the way of the fight, and she tumbled to the ground just as the blue shield vanished.

From under the table, she watched as the world erupted in colour. Green. Red. Blue. Yellow.

Dancers screamed and scattered. Guests gave shouts of alarm as the music ground to a halt. Lights flickered on. Shards of debris splintered all around her. She tried to peek out, but she could only see a dark shadow curling in and out of view, apparating, shielding, and dodging in a practised dance, the cloak making it hard for aurors to aim at him.

Draco, cloaked in shadows, blinked into view only long enough to chuck an underhanded yellow spell at a nearby auror. It missed the intended target but struck another man behind him in the face; spikes erupted out of his body, blood bursting into a hazy mist.

“Secure the exits,” Titus bellowed, shoving over chairs, pushing tables. “Make sure apparition wards are still in place. Get out of my way and leave him to me! I want him captured alive!”

Obedying Titus’ commands, the mass of aurors fell back to give him room to fight.

Titus twisted his wand and sent the ground rolling like a wave toward Draco. People toppled over with the force. Tables crashed. Hermione grabbed onto a chair for safety. But Draco tumbled and righted himself just in time to dodge a follow up spell.

***Crack. Crack. Crack.*** Draco and Titus battled, and Hermione had never seen anything like it. Chandeliers crashed and burst, the crystals sent flying as projectiles. Unforgivables sizzled by. Red and green met like two strands of lightning, the energy shattering glass around the room.

Tornado-like winds picked things up and smashed them into fragments, the flying particles stinging her eyes almost to blindness. Errant spells randomly struck people in the way. Faces melting with eroding curses. Blasting and cutting spells exploding and slicing through bodies. Fluid sucked from corpses in the collateral. Both Titus and Draco moved so fast she could barely view them.

Hermione began to crawl sideways, from table to table, closer to the moving battle. Glass sliced into her hands and knees, but she ignored the lacerations in her terror until Titus’s legs appeared in front of her, moving as gracefully as water. Without magic, there was little she could do to intervene, but she refused to stay in place.

It had only been seconds, but it felt like hours, when a spell landed just right against Draco’s shield, nearly shattering it.

She imagined Draco as Krum. Head rolling toward her, seeing the final surprise of death.

Draco’s protego blinked out with a hard blow from Titus, and in the short span of time that he released it, a spell hit somewhere on his body, and he cried out in pain. Without giving him a second of reprieve, Titus’ arm twirled, about to throw his final blow.

She couldn't let it happen a second time. Not to Draco.

Hermione lunged forward, crashing against Titus' lower legs, causing him to stumble and the spell to miss. Not hard enough of an impact for him to fall, but enough for him to lose his focus.

"Get the fuck off me," Titus growled at her, shoving her away toward a table.

Draco seized the opportunity she'd given him and apparated to the stage, while ripping something from his pocket.

"Plan B." His protego failed completely just as he slammed a vial to the floor. A red ring of fire exploded around him, roaring up to the ceiling before settling low enough she could see most of his body.

A terrible scream pierced the air, and she watched as an auror, who'd been caught near the circle of flames, burned alive. He twisted and turned on the ground, and before someone could send an aguamenti, he died, contorting in agony as he fell.

Smoke billowed into the crowd, choking her, the heat searing into her even from a distance. She leaned back and accidentally brushed a hand against the sticky skin of a corpse before crawling away, retching.

Draco remained calm in the middle of the circle, unaffected by the fire or the smell of the burning body, watching passively as the aurors tried to get to him unsuccessfully.

"Stop wasting your magic." Titus stood as close to the flames as he dared, and the other aurors did as they were ordered, stepping away. "It's a ritual circle. The old type. Nothing can get past it until it's brought to completion, or if he eliminates it by sacrificing some of his magic."

Invisibility cloaks repelled most sticking charms, so in the melee, the hood dropped down, revealing a secondary dark cloak underneath still attached in the correct places. Any sign of his blond hair or any other identifying features were hidden by shadows. Red eyes glared at Titus from the dark, black lines writhing like snakes along the now exposed pale skin of his arms, as if leaping for the twisted magic in its midst.

"The Dark Lord," an older club guest cursed, hiding under a nearby table. "He's returned."

Blood dripped down the front of Draco's neck. The wound looked serious, a strange yellow substance also leaking out of it, but he paid it no mind.

"You're under arrest," Titus said calmly without lowering his wand. "There's no escape. Though it stays my sword for a moment, we both know the circle you conjured needs a ritual and a sacrifice. The exits are sealed. Apparition out of here would slice you in two. And at this point, there are hundreds of aurors surrounding you."

"As they say, the show must go on." Draco reached down and yanked up an unconscious auror by the hair who'd been hidden by the flames, forcing the man to his knees in front of

him. The wizard's face resembled a tomato, as if he'd stayed out in the sun too long, but he remained alive. "Fortunately, I was taught to always have an extra sacrifice on hand—just in case."

"If you're thinking of using him as leverage, it won't work," Titus warned. "I don't give a fuck if he dies, and you're still in the same situation when the ritual completes. Give up some of your magic, walk down without a fight, and I won't kill you."

"Kill me? Why would a reaper be afraid of death when he commands it?" Vermilion eyes glowed from under the dark hood as he reached over the man's face, gripping under the chin, tilting it up toward the ceiling. "Men like you always think that if they fight hard enough, or run fast enough, they can avoid his scythe."

The flames pulsed as Draco began to chant in a language she didn't recognize, the words cutting the air, violence living inside them. Something old and abnormal. It sounded like a rock striking a stone. Draco bit down into the wrist of his free hand until he drew up a bead of blood, spitting the crimson on the head of the unconscious man in his grasp.

"But in the end, a reaper always takes back what belongs to him." In one brutal movement, Draco ripped upwards, scraping along the man's face. A wisp of golden black shadows detached with an unnatural scream, sucked out from the auror's throat.

Draco crushed the golden wisp in his palm, throwing it into the flames, as it howled with an unearthly scream until it silenced with a crackle. With a push of Draco's boot, the kneeling corpse of the auror followed, and the smell of burning flesh overwhelmed the room again.

Hermione stared in numb horror.

A soul.

Draco had just ripped a *soul* out of a man's body as if he were a dementor.

"Bloody hell," an auror whispered near her, stepping back in fear. Others around the room did the same.

Only Titus stood firm just outside the flames. He rolled his shoulders, as if agitated, itching for a fight. "Foolish move. The flames will dissipate soon with the ritual's cessation, and you've only added another damning charge to your future trial. You probably only have a minute or two at most. What are you going to do then?"

Draco searched the room until he found Hermione, huddled near a broken table. She found it impossible to read any emotion.

"Plan C, of course," he finally said, turning his attention back to Titus. "The worst of them all, I admit. I saved it for last, because it might not work, and it took a little to activate. But *c'est la vie*. What's a show without an encore?" Draco gave a mocking bow, holding a small object in his palm, red eyes trained on Titus. "Your soul is next, Butcher."

A pop, a folding of shadows, and Draco portkeyed out of view.



The room stilled. No one moved or spoke.

Hermione clutched her stomach, afraid a single wrong movement would cause her to vomit. Latent terror buzzed through her, nerves just now processing the danger and fear of the last few minutes, thinking she'd see Draco die right in front of her.

A portkey was the only thing that could bypass wards. She knew Lucius still had a couple on hand, the best of the best, goblin crafted and infused with elf magic. She doubted Draco even gave him a choice before stealing what he wanted— though he didn't trust his father enough to use it until backed into a corner.

An average wizard would probably never possess one. They were too hard to make. Too controlled. And too rare in post-curse England. Which meant, the portkey might point the finger of suspicion at Draco. Lucius would need to work overtime to dissolve the rumours.

Hermione crawled under the broken table, hiding from the world, forgotten in the following chaos as Titus barked furious orders.

"My stage!" Yaxley collapsed to his knees near the curtains with a few dancers hugging each other behind him. The fire still raged for several minutes, though it never spread, until it dissipated. The corpse of the man that Draco ripped the soul away from had burned to a crispy shell.

She waited under the table for an hour, knees pulled up to her chest, unsure what to do. The gravity of what she'd done slowly sunk into her.

Titus had almost killed or captured Draco. Only a flick of a wand away. But he hadn't managed either— because of her.

Anxiety gripped her, each second twisting it further until Titus crouched down in front of the table. Sweat dripped from his brow. "It's over now, Sprite. I have time to bring you home before returning."

"I was scared," Hermione tried to find an excuse without moving, curling her legs tighter. They both knew what she'd referenced.

Just like Draco, she couldn't read him. Soot marred his face. The wound from the cutting spell was still dripping blood from his cheek.

"Don't be frightened." He extended his hand. "Come to me."

Without magic, what else could she do to defend herself? Nothing in his body language showed aggression, though she didn't trust his calm demeanour either.

But that wasn't the only reason she remained wary of taking his hand. To provoke Draco into attacking, he'd placed her on the table, separated her legs. And the desire in her system made her enjoy everything past that point, his expert hands, stroking and squeezing her inner thighs. He'd only pretended. But still.

Even now, the thought of his hands kept her body vibrating on edge.

He must understand, because he sighed and pinched the top of his nose in frustration. They'd both done something the other could be angry over.

"I was scared," she whispered again, finding the courage to exit the safety of her hiding place.

When she stood, so did he, and he took a firm hold on the back of her neck, steering her through the maze of broken tables, shoving shattered glass out of the way with his wand. The bright lights somehow made everything more sinister. "I'm sorry you were scared. I didn't want you to be here, but I had no choice."

He limped beside her, not putting his full weight on his left foot. One of Draco's spells must have landed. Or maybe she'd injured him when she'd collided with him. The thought made her nauseous for the consequences.

"Are you injured?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"You're not. Give me your hands."

She looked down at her wounds from crawling in surprise, having forgotten about them in the aftermath. Titus took his time drawing out the shards of glass from her palms and knees, using episkeys on each one before once again leading her to the floo.

Hermione tried not to look closely at the destruction. In the red corridor before the floo, she almost stumbled over a dead body, but Titus lifted her out of the way, and her attention snapped to her feet with a gasp.

The young girl stared back at her with empty eyes and an open mouth—the one Titus had sent to the ministry.

"You killed her?"

"No, someone else did that. Probably another rat."

Oh.

Hermione had a strong suspicion of who might have done it—someone desperate for silence—but didn't want to think about it right now.

Titus' grip on her neck tightened as he led her forward, still limping as he went. Blood dripped from his face, the slash reaching from his nose to his ear.

When they got to the floo, he threw in the powder and shoved her forward, stepping in behind her. She stumbled into the sitting room of Nott manor, flinging herself around. "I was—"

"If you say you were scared one more fucking time."

He stomped forward, grabbing and tugging her toward him with both hands on her arms. He pierced her with a glare, as if performing occlumency, sifting through her mind, but she felt no such intrusion. Her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth, silenced by his fury.

He breathed hard, chest going up and down at a rapid pace, and his eyes looked watery and bloodshot.

“Why are you being like this?” she whispered.

“You know why.” He clenched his jaw as if preventing himself from saying more.

Neither of them moved. She pretended ignorance, while he tried to crack through it.

The proximity began to mess with her mind. She reached out, grasping his wrist holding her in place, desperate for the touch of skin to skin.

“Are you still feeling the effects of the drug?”

“Yes.” She hated herself at the moment, but it hurt too much. She’d do anything to get rid of it. “Please.”

“Please what?” He sneered. “Please have mercy? Please touch you? Or please don’t touch you? I want you to be *very* clear.”

She didn’t know, so she only trembled in his grasp without answering.

His expression hardened. Before she could stop him, he lifted her up and slung over his shoulder, trapping her thighs against his chest, marching out of the sitting room and along the corridors. She thought he might be heading to his bedroom, but he made an opposite turn.

“Where are you taking me?”

He refused to answer her, but she knew already. Panic gripped her and, at her mental limit, she struggled, striking his back with the intent to hurt him.

He ignored the assault, unaffected by her violence, and took the staircase, descending into the damp darkness of the Nott dungeons.

A few ghosts rattled chains as they entered, still haunting the ancient cells— men tortured to death long ago. Theo used to try to convince them that they could walk around, but none of them listened to him, and Hermione never liked staying long, always spooked by the rats and the dark.

“Put me down,” Hermione asked, this time as sweetly as she could manage to make her voice, no longer wasting her energy on fighting.

With a tap on a door, the old iron obeyed him, creaking open, revealing a primitive cell with a dirt floor.

A flick of his wand and a cot appeared in the corner, along with a pillow and blanket, and he dusted away most of the cobwebs and dirt. Once finished, he gently set her down, and her knees wobbled as she stared up at him. “Why am I here?”

“You’ve been hiding something from me. I’ve tried to pretend nothing was off because you were happier, and I— well, I’d hoped—”

“You don’t mean to leave me in the dungeon alone, do you?”

He turned her and pressed her against the cold, slightly damp stone wall, and she bit her tongue as he forced her to look at him.

“We both know why you’re here tonight.”

“I just didn’t want to see anyone die—.”

“I could have died!” His voice cracked on the words, shaking her shoulders, eyes rimmed with red. “Pushing me in the middle of a duel could have killed me. Is my death what you were intending?”

“No! Of course not.” She realised now how vulnerable she was against his formidable presence with nothing to protect her. “I just wanted to go home without seeing anyone be killed. I’ve already lost Finch. I can’t lose anyone else that I know, and that includes you.”

Something flickered across his expression. Maybe guilt, but it was gone before she could detangle it. “I understand your fear, but I wouldn’t have killed him tonight, especially without a trial or interrogation. Keeping you down here is the last thing I want to do, but I’m not sure if I can trust you right now, even in the manor, even without your magic. Until I can eliminate any involvement from you, I must keep you contained in some way. For your safety and my sanity.”

“Don’t you dare keep me here!”

She tried to push past him, but he easily stopped her by lifting her up and forcing her to sit on the cot. He exited with hard footsteps; Hermione jumped to stop him, but it was too late. The lock clicked behind him.

“I’ll be back shortly to make your stay more comfortable,” he said, looking haunted through the bars. “I know you don’t like the dark, so I’ll keep the torch on. This isn’t a punishment, Sprite. It’s a necessity, just to make sure. You won’t be alone for long. And you know the ghosts won’t bother you. They merely make noise.”

“Please, Titus. Don’t leave me here. I’m—” her voice broke as she clutched the cold bars. Fear crawled up her back. “I have nightmares. Being down here has always terrified me.” She’d never begged like this, everything vulnerable ripping out of her, loathing every word out of her mouth. “And it’s hurting me, Titus. The drug. It’s still there, and I need help to get it away. Just your body heat. Stay with me.”

He closed his eyes, as if in pain, and turned away.

“It’s just arousal, Sprite, and it’s fake anyway. It will go away soon. If desire could kill, then I’d have died long ago.”

He refused to acknowledge her following pleas until he reached the bottom of the staircase.

“How could you be so cruel?” she tried to shake the bars out of place. “You said that you’d protect me! That you’d never hurt—”

“Tell me how I’ve lied,” Titus snarled. “Tell me how I hurt you. You couldn’t do that, beyond your feelings, which change every few days. Everything I do is to protect you, even from yourself.” He refused to turn around while speaking, as if he couldn’t let himself look at her. “The dark soul spell used tonight was from the Black Grimoire. I only know this because I witnessed Bellatrix use it once a very long time ago before the curse— in this very manor when my father was alive and the Dark Lord still in power. All the old families have dabbled in dark magic, Hermione. Very few are clean of it.” He straightened, voice deepening. “But not many of them dared use death magic like the Blacks did. It was their specialty. Their whole bloodline is susceptible to madness because of it.”

The hair along her body stood up in alarm. Between the portkey and the dark spells— was it enough to prove the Reaper was Draco?

No, it wasn’t. Not with the way Titus’ shoulders remained tight. He would need to find irrefutable evidence to implicate a Malfoy. Lucius might have thrown her to the wolves without care, but he’d upend this world to keep Draco safe.

“You helped a criminal escape tonight,” he continued when she didn’t respond. “No— a terrorist. And I suspect you’ve been doing much more. When I finish cleaning up the mess in the club, I’m going to come back, and you’re going to tell me all your secrets.”

“I was starting to love you again,” she lied, wishing to wound him. “How many times are you planning on breaking my heart? Soon I’m going to reach a point where I’ll never be able to forgive you.”

He visibly flinched and reached out to touch the wall, as if to gain strength. “If I’m wrong, and you’re innocent of all I suspect, then I deserve your hatred. I’ll punish myself for the rest of my life if it earns your forgiveness. But—” he sighed wearily. “Fucking hell, for the first time in my life, I want my instincts to be wrong... but I’m certain they’re not. Certain enough to risk your eternal hatred.”

He marched up the stairs without looking back as he disappeared into the main floor of the manor.

Shouting and screaming would do nothing but wear her out, so Hermione sat on the cot and stared at the torch on the wall, trying to wrap her mind around what had happened. It flickered as she contained her fear and panic, shelving it away like Draco had taught her.

For hours she did this, entranced by the flames, attempting to lose herself in meditation only stopping to touch herself until she shattered over and over again, bringing no relief, only agony.

The mental trick helped to manage her emotions in between bouts of unsatisfying orgasms—until it didn't. The charms on the torch had always been faulty. It flickered and flickered and then, abruptly, it went out, leaving her in a darkness so complete, she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She existed in an abyss of nothing, only reminded that she still lived by the touch of her hand to her face. The rattle of the ghost chains. The clawing of rats nearby.

Even though Titus couldn't possibly have known the torch would falter, she blamed him as the fear consumed her.

She whispered Draco's name, hoping that if she said it enough, it would transform into a beacon for him to follow.

And then she wept, screaming into the cot to muffle the noise, until she was drained.

The nothingness crushed her as she waited, knowing no one could come to save her, even if they wanted to. Her heart fractured, emotions severed at the roots with a swift blow. The tender sections rotted away, leaving room for a creature to crawl into its place, salivating for blood.

Hermione's soul once again turned into stone, hardened by pain and terror. Her tears dried, dragged back behind the heavy wall where they'd once resided.

In the dark, her old nightmares, buried long ago in the graveyard of her soul, crawled out with decayed fingers, taking over her conscious thoughts. And she let them, finally facing everything that could crush her. A mountain of violence and bones built before her that she clambered over, refusing to die along with the others, until she stood at the very top.

Titus wouldn't kill Draco.

And he wouldn't touch her secrets.

Because she wouldn't let him.

Hermione adjusted her previous strategies as she waited, knowing what she'd done before wouldn't work going forward.

She moved the confusing puzzle pieces around in her mind— everything she'd learned and planned— picking them up and putting them down, sliding them back and forth, until they all finally clicked into place, revealing the only way forward.

No longer feeling anything at all, Hermione stared into the void while constructing Titus Nott's downfall.

Trigger Warnings: prostitution, sexual slavery, drugged drinks, dubious consent, and graphic depictions of violence.

Because this chapter was cut in half, and I also plan on cutting the epilogue into two, the final chapter count will increase. I won't be changing the final count to reflect this until I have a better idea of what it will end at. However, if I ever have to cut a future chapter, I'll try and post them closer together like I did this one.

# Chapter 53: Praying Mantis

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestions:

Tamino- "You Don't Own Me"

Blue Foundation- "Eyes on Fire" ( original AND Zeds Dead Remix)

Skylar Gray- "Final Warning"

A thousand thank yous to my alpha team and my beta, MyPrivateInsanity!

Trigger Waning at the end:

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

## Praying Mantis

The ghosts quieted as Titus entered the dungeon, the rats skittering back into hiding with the scrape of his boots against stone. The torch flickered to life, and the cell door rattled as it opened.

Hermione faced the cold wall on the cot, curled into a ball, knees toward her chest.

"Fucking hell." The edge of the mattress sank under his weight, and he turned her shoulders gently to face him, forcing her to straighten.

"The light went out." Her voice didn't sound like her own.

"I didn't know." Titus gathered her into a hug, her ear pressed against his heart, listening to the familiar steady rhythm under the soft fabric of his shirt. "Merlin, I would've come back sooner."

Her body trembled from hours of unfulfilled release, but her thoughts remained clear. Plans weaved through her mind, shifting and changing by the second.

What she did know for sure: while stuck in the dungeon, and at Titus' mercy, she'd need to play into her old role— just long enough to be released.

"You left me alone," she accused.

"I'm here now." The words rumbled in his chest. "Why didn't you call for Bitty?"



She'd thought of doing that after her panic had subsided, but the situation played perfectly into her plans.

"I was so scared that I forgot."

He held her tighter.

Just as she'd hoped, Titus had entered the dungeons still angry, but she intentionally twisted the emotion into guilt.

Hermione didn't know how long Titus had been gone, but he hadn't raced home. Based on his damp hair, he'd taken a shower, washing away the blood. Perhaps he then drank whisky in front of the fire, stewing in his fury, refusing to go back down to check on her to extend her punishment.

"It was so dark," she whispered, clinging closer to him. "And the rats—"

"Is the potion—"

"It's gone." The desire had dissipated sometime in the middle of the night, leaving her ill.

"Are you okay?"

"I don't feel so great." Which was the truth. "Are you still angry with me?"

He didn't move at first, cursing under his breath, but then he untangled her from him and lowered her so that she rested on the pillow, staring up at him.

"It's much more complicated than anger. I understand my blame should be directed toward people more deserving, but... my heart feels otherwise."

By other people, he meant Draco. Even after everything, Titus still considered her incapable of thinking for herself completely, especially in retaliation against him. If she *did* make a poor decision, then she must have been enticed from an outside source.

Whether he viewed her as autonomous or not didn't matter anymore. She only cared that she could potentially use it against him.

"I know you must be exhausted, but we still need to talk about last night." Titus' hand drifted to her cheek, moving up to sink in her curls. Despite his sweet talk, he wasn't easily forgiving her. This remained an interrogation. "You know the identity of the Reaper... don't you?"

"The Reaper?" she furrowed her brow in mock confusion.

"Don't play ignorant. The man at the club."

Hermione had already prepared for this, deciding what to reveal and what to conceal. She held many secrets, some more dangerous and important than others. By her involvement in the duel, he already knew the answer; he merely wanted her to confirm it. Trying to hide that truth would be foolish and futile.

She bit her tongue until it hurt, pretending the appropriate amount of resistance

“Answer me,” he demanded.

If she gave him the treasure he searched for, he might stop digging.

“I guessed,” she admitted in a soft voice. “His cloak was familiar.”

“And were you intending to harm me?”

“I’ve already told you, I only pushed you because you were about to curse him. I didn’t want either of you to get hurt.” She placed a hand on top of the one clutching the side of her face, and his grip loosened just a little. “Please believe me.”

Titus groaned in frustration, leaning forward to rest his face against her neck, stubble tickling her skin. He turned his head so that his soft lips ghosted up her throat to the edge of her jaw, her pulse like a hummingbird's wings under his mouth, holding her tight against him. “What else are you hiding from me?”

“Nothing.” A show of brief resistance would sell her points.

“You’ve been in contact with Malfoy. I know you have.” His lips moved closer to her mouth, grazing her skin.

“I haven’t—”

“You look calm, but your heart betrays you. Stop protecting him. Malfoy doesn’t deserve your loyalty. He doesn’t care about your safety like I do, and he doesn’t love you like I do either. He just wants to win against me, and he capitalised on your vulnerability to do so. The faster you tell me the truth, the faster we can put this behind us.”

“Will you let me out if I do?”

His lips left her jaw and moved to hover over her mouth, expression turned to stone. “I make no promises. But if you *don’t* tell me, I guarantee you’ll stay right here for the foreseeable future.”

A strangled noise escaped her, made of every negative emotion she’d felt since the torch extinguished.

“I can’t be here another.... okay, I’ll tell you. Don’t be angry.” Something important needed to be sacrificed, and she’d already calculated which thing to place on the pyre, inflammatory enough that it might distract him.

“Tell me.”

“Well, I—” she took a deep breath. “Draco and I met several times in Diagon Alley.”

He froze and then pulled back to glare.

“What *the fuck* did you just say?” The words were a sword to her throat. “Where?”

“At Madam Malkin’s.”

His lips opened and closed, stunned, swallowing his next words. She waited for the explosion, but it never happened, as if he’d already steeled himself for every possible treachery.

“Draco just wanted to make sure that I was alright after—”

”Stop,” he snapped. “How could this be possible?”

She broke his stare, acting flustered. Out of everyone, his brother might be the only person safe from his revenge. “Theo organised the first one.”

“That little— he’s not going to enjoy the consequences of his actions. I warned him not to—”

“Don’t get too mad at him,” she interrupted before he could spiral. “It was when I was unable to eat, and he grew as worried as you. I convinced him I needed to say goodbye for closure. And then he ferried a few letters. That’s it. He refused to continue after that.”

“You’re both so fucking predictable. I’m not sure how I didn’t put the pieces together before.” Violence simmered under the surface. “You know this means I’m never allowing him to take you to Diagon Alley again, even if you both beg. I might not even let you out of this manor for years.”

Hermione let herself feel that future in every neuron of her brain, unable to get out of this cage, unable to shove off the hand around her throat, slowly tightening. The stakes had never been higher.

Titus wished to ask her other intimate questions. She sensed them boiling up.

*Did Malfoy touch you?*

*Did he kiss you?*

*Did he fuck you?*

He never voiced his fears, though she suspected he believed the worst. He sat up abruptly, his whole body taut with brittle energy, curling his hands into the blanket beside her.

“Malkin must have facilitated the meetings too— or someone working for her.”

Hermione’s stomach hurt, scrambling for anything to protect the shopkeeper. “Draco threatened her. It was duress. Don’t kill her. I couldn’t bear it.”

He frowned, lips pulled back. “And what will you give me for her life?”

“I don’t know. What do I even have to give?”

“Lots of things.” He considered that. “I’m not going to kill her.”

“Don’t torture her.”

He didn’t look as if wanted to capitulate. “I won’t resort to my methods unless I feel she colluded with the Order, though it won’t prevent her from incarceration. Is that sufficient?”

Her stomach still hurt, but she nodded. The shopkeeper took money from Draco, but Hermione doubted she worked for the Order.

“Let’s get back on track,” he continued. “Did you know of his involvement in the inferi attack?”

That was an easy answer to give. “I recognized his handwriting.”

“And you were okay with what he did? He tried to kill me,” he seethed.

“I didn’t want him to target you—”

“He butchered the Lestrangle brothers, and he—”

“Those monsters deserved it! I asked him to do it long ago. So blame me instead. In fact, you should have done it first! Rabastan had sick preferences, and Rodolphous *raped* Julie. His own daughter—”

“I don’t mourn their deaths, but Malfoy is *not* the law.”

“But you are!” They both stilled, and then she whispered. “I asked you for help first.”

She dug the knife of blame into his chest on purpose, making it seem as if he had given in to her plea, none of the events would have happened.

“I’d given you options to save her, and you didn’t take them.”

“You made it a transaction. It should’ve been free.”

He flinched as if she’d slapped him. “I simply asked for you to spend time with me. Would that have been so horrid?”

“Draco offered his help without strings.”

“Don’t be a fool,” he seemed frustrated. “A Malfoy does nothing for free. He wanted everything from you in return, and he allowed you to place yourself in danger. Something I would *never* have done.”

“I just wanted to help my friend.” She broke his stare and turned her face to the side, and he gently turned it back with a finger on her cheek.

“I know, my love. It’s all in the past. But—” he sighed. “But what happened last night is not.”

He waited for her to respond.

“Tell me,” her mouth felt dry. “What’s my crime besides saying goodbye and attempting to save his life? I lived with him for a year. I’m not made of stone.”

He scrunched his eyes briefly closed. “I’m not punishing you for saying goodbye. I predicted long ago you’d both try to pull a foolish stunt like this. I also accept that it will take time to shed his conditioning. But the fact you pushed me—”

“Stop being obtuse. Let’s say you’re right, and he doesn’t love me. Even then, I still wouldn’t want him *or you* to die. I couldn’t even use an unforgivable against you, for Merlin’s sake. What makes you think I could truly harm you?”

That did the trick. He tilted his head, gaze trailing over her face as if to memorise every slope and line. “If it helps loosen your tongue, nothing you tell me right now will be used in any investigation. The trail could lead back to you, and I can’t risk it in any official capacity. Whatever you say will stay between us.” He paused as if searching for what could crack through her wall. “How did the Reaper get his information—”

“How would I know? With his galleons probably. You’re not the only wizard with power and connections.”

“You’re lying again.” He took a deep breath, all the tension leaving his body. “But I’m tired and so are you. The truth can wait for another day.”

“Search my mind if you want.”

A blatant dare.

He shook his head, brushing her curls to the side. “You’re in no shape to do anything but rest. I’ll be back sometime soon with a cup of tea.”

Veritaserum.

Like before, he wouldn’t dare use any legilimency on her, because he feared what she would show him out of spite. Titus didn’t really want to know all her truths— not the ones that could wound him— just the ones that would benefit him the most.

Lucky for her, like the last time he used it, veritaserum could be manipulated easier than legilimency. Half-truths. Vague answers. The questions needed to be specific for it to work.

“I’ll make sure the dungeon stays lit.” He tucked a blanket around her, using a charm to make the cell the perfect temperature. “Bitty will be by later with some books and other things to do. And if you’re exceptionally well behaved this week, I’ll consider even allowing you to read one of the banned titles in the library... as a reward.”

“Don’t be a tease.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, almost a smile. He stood to exit, but lingered in the doorway, and while he did, his face shuttered with occlumency. “I have one last point to make. And

before I make it, you need to know that I'm *deadly* serious. More serious than I've ever been."

Dread curled around her, wary of his dark tone. "I'm listening."

"First, I *never* want to know if Malfoy touched you at Malkin's or at any other time you've not divulged. I also don't want to know if you let him— stop looking at me right now. I *don't* want to know." He placed a hand on the metal bar beside him, steadying himself. "However, if you *have* made that dire mistake, and Malfoy has managed to get you pregnant under my nose, I'll butcher the fucker in front of you, damn your tears. And after he's buried, I'll risk erasing every single intimate memory of him in your mind. He'll be a stranger again." The ensuing silence allowed the threat to sink into her soul before he flicked his cold stare back to her. "And the best part— Malfoy would die knowing that his child would grow up calling *me* father."

Hermione held his shadowed gaze without moving. "You don't need to worry about that."

Which was true, but not in the way he suspected.

"For your sake, I hope you're right." Titus broke the standoff first, keeping his fists clenched the entire way up the stairs.

In the aftermath, she stared at the damp, stone wall, unsure who won their game of secrets in this first round.

*Step one*, Hermione thought, crossing off the first checkmark on her list. *Survive Titus' first interrogation.*

---

A purr woke Hermione from a deep sleep, finding Crookshanks on top of her, kneading his paws into the cotton skirt of the nightgown Bitty had delivered after dinner.

Like always, Hermione didn't question how the kneazle got past the wards and into her bed. She just gathered her familiar to her chest, only stopping her squeeze when he gave a soft hiss in warning.

"I missed you." Hermione snuggled her face into his fur. He allowed her to hold him with great patience for several minutes until he struggled away. That's when she noticed something different. "You're wearing a collar?"

She touched the black leather along his neck, and a small, folded paper fell out into her lap.

Hermione picked it up at first in confusion and then with reverence, already understanding that Draco had managed to find a way to send her a message past the Nott wards.

She unfolded the tiny parchment slowly, savouring each second, reading the heavy, bold script.

**I've been sending messages for days without getting any replies. Are you ignoring me on purpose? Are you injured? Please—** the paper blotched with ink as if he hesitated there for

a while. **Please tell me I'm an insufferable arse in that self-righteous tone of yours.**

**Just don't ignore me.**

Hermione wished to jump within the ink stains to be carried back to the manor so that she could yell at him like he wanted for falling into Titus' traps.

And then she'd tell him that she forgave him, even if his choices led her to a dungeon.

Absent a quill and parchment, communication proved impossible, and Titus would only allow her the fwooper feather. Sending the note back would give him the message that she refused to talk to him. Trying to hide it in her little cell would lead to discovery.

Without magic to vanish it, Hermione placed the tiny paper in her mouth and chewed, swallowing with a grimace at the texture and taste, eliminating the evidence.

---

Crookshanks stayed a few days, hunting the rats until she didn't hear a single noise at night beyond the ghosts. And then he disappeared again, returning to Draco.

Hermione tracked the days by the delivered meals. Titus visited when she pretended to sleep, and she watched through barely open eyes as he checked the torches and other amenities the elves had brought to make her stay comfortable, including setting up a temporary bathroom with an extension of the room, along with a door for privacy.

He seemed unwilling to confront her again, as if unsure of the correct way to deal with her.

Hermione tried to be patient, going over the steps she'd crafted. Only a few months remained to complete her objectives and escaping the dungeons stayed the top priority.

But she couldn't bloody do anything if he ignored her!

After four tedious days, Titus' boots finally scuffed against stone as he made his way downstairs. When he entered the cell, she surprised him by jumping into his arms for a hug, almost throwing him off balance.

"Don't leave me alone for so long."

He froze, surprised and obviously pleased, wrapping his arms tightly around her, face tilted down into her frizzy hair.

He didn't trust anything she said, just as she didn't trust him. She'd be stupid to count on that.

But he *wanted* to trust her affection, badly enough that he might make a mistake.

"Work has been horrifically busy." He pulled back, holding her shoulders, looking down with a serious expression. "I thought we could have tea."

The veritaserum.

Hermione walked back to the bed, sitting as Bitty appeared with a tray filled with a teapot and teacups, along with sugar and cream. He prepared her tea the way she liked. After handing it to her, he rested in a conjured chair in the corner, watching her closely as she drank.

She expected the pull of the potion.

But nothing happened.

“This isn’t veritaserum?” She set her half-drunk tea aside, smothering her surprise.

“No, it was a test. A person without anything to hide wouldn’t hesitate.”

“And did I pass your test?”

“After all this time, you still possess many of your same tells, though they are more subtle now.”

She resisted glaring at him. “If you suspect I’m hiding something, then why not just go through my mind or make me drink the real thing?”

“Because I want your honesty. Forcing it from you will do nothing for me in the long run. The Reaper knows things he shouldn’t, and so does the Order. After my own internal investigation, I believe the leak to be *very* close to home, despite how impossible it seems given your restrictions. I’ve thought through everything, but the conclusion remains the same. So until you give me the information to clear your slate, or until I discover some way to ensure your proper behaviour despite it, you’ll remain in this dungeon.”

She considered the problem: Titus refused to let her out unless she told him more, and he didn’t seem to want to force it out of her by legilimency or veritaserum. However, if she told him about the transfer bag, he’d use it to pretend to be her, luring Draco into another trap, and there’d be no avenue to warn him.

And telling him anything else would only turn his anger toward her again.

Panic rose inside her, resembling claustrophobia, unsure how she’d endure the mental torture of the dungeons for so long, but she managed to quell it before it took control of her senses.

“I have nothing else to tell you,” she said.

He scoffed. “Such a little liar.”

She needed to stick to her plans, no matter the cost. Or she’d lose everything regardless.

“How long are you going to keep me here?”

“Until Beltane, if I have to.” He paused, hands gripping his knees, as if waiting for an intense reaction.



“I suppose I should make myself comfortable then, since I have no secrets left to free me.” She leaned back into her cot to display her point.

He blinked, surprised by her apathy. “You’re not going to fight me?”

“I’m used to being in a cage.”

“Don’t pretend this isn’t deserved.” A muscle in his jaw ticked. “I’ve given you so much forgiveness, and you’ve done nothing but throw it in my face. I’m not sure what—” Titus stopped mid-sentence and examined her like a difficult puzzle, crossing his arms along his wide chest. And then he leaned back in his chair as well, legs spread, looking introspective. “Before the curse, not many purebloods married for love. Keeping the bloodlines pure and the estates intact was more important than any emotion. Arranged marriages were common. The bride and groom had little to no say in their future partners, especially for heirs.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“I’m making a point— about me. Curse or no, I would’ve had a similar duty as I do now. So maybe that’s why I don’t understand your continued resistance when all I’ve ever wanted to do is keep you safe. Procreation was always an expectation, and I thought you carried a similar understanding.”

She considered that. “Were you engaged?”

“To a girl from an old family in Latvia with business ties to my father. I’d only met her once before the curse. She was luckily my age, but we had nothing else in common. She must have died during the initial chaos, because the magic binding contract vanished from our vault.”

“And you would’ve gone through with it?”

“It was my *duty* to marry her.” Blue eyes blazed with the flickering light from the torch. “And duty is everything to me. I would’ve done my best to treat her well. And though formal mistresses were common for men *and* women in pureblood marriages, I would’ve honoured her with fidelity if she wanted it.”

“Even without love?”

“Even without,” he answered. “And as I’ve told you many times, I now give all of those promises to you. The only difference between us and the old marriages is that we *already* love each other. Don’t you see? It’s more than I ever hoped to have. However— If you insist that what’s between us isn’t love, then I will just treat it like an arranged marriage, and consummation of the bond is still a requirement.”

“When?” Finally, she breached the question dancing between them since her capture. “At Beltane?”

“The magical rites are the ideal time for marriage vows.”

“Marriage?” she didn’t bother hiding her surprise. Not just a binding spell, but a true marriage? “Is that even allowed?”

“I’ve already gotten permission from Dolohov, with the requirement that it remain private. To the world, you’ll be my muggleborn. To me, you’ll be my wife.”

Dolohov wanted to keep Titus content, even if he shoved aside tradition to do so.

“What’s the point?”

“True marriage vows— the old kind— would give me the proper authority over you. No more disobedience. No more worrying about you doing something foolish behind my back. And before you get dramatic about it, I will also promise not to use my power for anything but your safety. On that, I will not yield.”

No wonder Dolohov approved. The oldest marriage vows allowed the husband complete control over the wife, usually infused into a ring or other jewellery. Though, like Veritaserum, the demands could be cleverly worked around if need be, and if she ever managed to get the jewelry off, the magic could be voided, though it would be far more complicated than the universe necklace.

Titus meant to place the final lock on her cage.

“And if I refuse to participate?” Unlike some binding spells, marriage vows required verbal consent for the magic to work, and it lasted until death unless she extracted herself.

“You won’t refuse, because I’ll offer incentives. Something I *know* you won’t turn down. There won’t be any force involved. I’d hoped to make the night something special, but like most arranged marriages, it doesn’t have to be that. If you’d prefer, we could just *fuck*.”

The hair along her neck rose with the way the obscene word snapped off his tongue.

*Bribes* is what he meant.

“What incentives?”

“Give me time.” He glanced at the bed, wearing his weariness like his cloak. “For now, the only thing I want for you to do is to give me room beside you.”

He expanded the mattress before walking toward her, collapsing into bed. His mass caused the mattress to dip enough that she rolled toward him, and he used the opportunity to tug her into his arms.

She hated that the touch comforted her in her prolonged solitude.

“I don’t sleep well without you,” he whispered.

---

Like he’d threatened, Titus didn’t let her out. Days turned to weeks. She kept a makeshift calendar but had no way of discovering if she’d gotten off track.

Titus had expanded her cell to encompass most of the dungeon. Installed artificial lights, and a magical faux window like the one in his office, which mimicked the weather outside. A fireplace arrived next, along with plush chairs and rugs and bookshelves. Before long, he'd created an entire flat for her to reside inside.

Hermione kept her mind focused on her plan.

Knowing just what would get under his skin, Hermione faked a deep depression, similar to her grief after Finch's death. She stopped eating on purpose. Did nothing but sit in her bed and stare at the wall listlessly.

One day, he hovered over her in concern. "Did you read the books Bitty sent?"

She stayed silent on purpose.

"Do you want to play chess?"

Continued silence.

"Don't do this again. I don't want to have to imperio you to eat." There was desperation in his voice paired with raw guilt. "Is there anything that would help you feel better?"

He probably expected more silence or maybe a demand to be released. "Someone to talk to."

He mulled that over, probably relieved to have a task he could complete. "I could possibly allow company."

"I'd like to see Luna."

"If I allow the Lovegood girl to visit, will you eat and participate in life?"

"Yes."

"Give me your promise."

"I promise."

He gently stroked her hair with affection, the tense lines in his body relaxing.

Hermione almost made the mistake of smiling.

*Step two: get in contact with the outside world.*

---

Luna arrived the next day, greeting the ghosts first. They stopped rattling their chains to groan back at her in a way that resembled a hello.

"Mistress Hermione, your friend has arrived." Bitty opened the cell and patted Luna's hand with affection before closing it, popping away.

Luna examined the room, eyes squinting at the window. “A charmed sky can never replace the real thing.”

“No,” she agreed. “But it’s better than the dark.”

“Sometimes.”

They started their visit by sipping tea while talking about Luna’s stay at the Goyle manor. She’d amassed a whole collection of seashells for Mr. Goyle, who proudly displayed them on his mantle. Gregory still liked to accompany her on her shell hunts, and Mrs. Goyle allowed her free access to the gardens, often helping in the greenhouse.

Hermione waited until the middle of the visit to risk leaning over and whispering, “I have one more favour to ask of you. If you decide it’s too dangerous, you can refuse, and I wouldn’t blame you.”

To an outsider, Luna’s stare might appear blank, but Hermione now knew Luna saw into hidden spaces.

“Nargles are actually a hive species,” Luna whispered back. “Not many people know that. Like bees, they work together as a collective to survive. I always thought humans should be like that more often, because we’re meant to need each other. Pretending otherwise harms everyone.”

Hermione paused, reading between the lines. “So you’re saying—”

“I wish to be a Nargle. What do you need?”

Hermione would have cried in relief if she could. “I need you to contact Draco Malfoy. Tell him... that I’m locked in the Nott dungeons. With a letter maybe or whatever you can manage.”

“Oh, that would be easy. I see him all the time.”

Hermione pulled back in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“He’s friends with Gregory. Visited several times for the past few weeks and always asks me about you. He’s been looking a bit peaky lately, and his aura has gotten much darker.”

Draco *wasn’t* good friends with Greg. Which meant he only visited the castle specifically to question Luna, knowing she remained one of the only people who might be allowed to visit her.

Even without speaking, they’d managed to have the same strategy. Her heart ached at the thought, feeling as if an invisible string connected them over time and space, constantly pulling them back together.

She surprised Luna by lunging forward, gathering her into a hug. “I’m lucky to have a Nargle like you.”

Luna's smile warmed the damp dungeons, her expression free of madness.

---

A day after Luna's visit, Crookshanks reappeared, weaving through the iron bars, with a dead rat in his mouth.

"Gross," Hermione said. "Do not bring that thing near me."

Her cat didn't listen, depositing the dead grey rodent at the foot of her bed with a haughty look as if to say she should be more grateful for his gifts.

"What a *lovely* snack." Hermione wished her cat understood sarcasm. Instead, the orange beast jumped on her cot. She gave him the required pets before he sat back, scratching near his collar.

Another note, carefully folded, fell out from beneath it.

The familiar blocky scrawl greeted her.

**Lovegood told me everything. Nott's gone lower than I thought he could. Even if it kills me, you'll be free of him. You'll be free of this entire rotten world my father helped create too. I promise you this. I'm coming for you, Granger.**

Draco didn't make idle threats, even if it meant getting himself caught or murdered in the process. She worried his continued descent into the dark arts would lead him to another bout of impulsive violence.

Like the last time, Hermione placed the paper in her mouth, getting rid of the evidence.

*Step three: inform Draco of her imprisonment.*

---

Hermione hated her existence. She did nothing else but sleep, eat, attempt to exercise, read a book or two, and then have dinner with Titus. The repetition turned to monotony, and anxious energy tingled under her skin, unrelieved by doing anything.

Despite owning his own comfortable bed, Titus continued to sleep in the cot beside her, clutching her to him like she was Hopper, slowly transforming the mattress into something more pleasant with softer bedding by the day.

"Why don't you just let me out?" she whispered one night in the dark. "You could lock me in your room. Or my old room. If you think about it, *any* room could be a cage."

He kissed the top of her head. "You know what you need to give me to get out."

"But I know nothing else."

"We'll see."

Fury simmered inside her, wishing to explode from her veins. The claustrophobia squeezed her lungs, imagining her world growing smaller and smaller and smaller.

And then a sudden thought stuck with such force she almost jolted out of bed.

For weeks, she'd been thinking too literally about getting out of the dungeons, pouring all of her manipulation into Titus, unsure how to exit her cage without spilling all her secrets. She'd prepared to do something far more drastic, but she might not have to now.

Only a Nott heir could open the doors.

Luckily for her, there were two of them.

---

Hermione counted each second as the days crawled by, trying to gauge the best timing.

No matter what Theo did, Titus' anger toward his brother had an expiration date. He loved him too much to ice him out completely.

Knowing Titus, he'd think Theo's betrayal evened the score, erasing the sin of killing James Potter. And after several tearful apologies, they could return to being a happy little family.

A single whisper in Luna's ear was all it took. Her friend promised to send the letter to her brother right away. And then all she had to do was wait.

And wait.

And wait.

And wait.

Until she teetered so close to madness that she started to enjoy groaning with the ghosts just for something new to do, unsure how much time had passed.

When she heard boots clicking down the stairs weeks into her torture of near-solitude, she recognized the patter of steps instantly. Lighter. More hesitant.

"Theo?" Her voice cracked.

Even with the torch flickering low, she recognized the unconcealed horror in his widened eyes, examining her living conditions in open disbelief.

"Bloody fucking hell!" Righteous fury laced each word. He briskly walked forward, so that he could hold her through the cell bars. "I thought Lovegood had finally gone completely mental when she sent me the letter. I couldn't believe he'd do this. What happened?"

"He doesn't trust me."

"Trust!" His fingers shook along her shoulder, and tears glistened in his hazel eyes. "How long have you been down here?"

"I'm not sure. I try to keep track of it, but Bitty doesn't help me. I think she was ordered not to give me a calendar."

"Why would he not want you to know what day it is?"

Hermione had suspicions, but they weren't for his ears, so she only shrugged.

"What day is it?"

"April fifteenth."

So close to Beltane that she almost missed her window. It confirmed her hypothesis. Titus planned to let her out at the last moment like he'd threatened, just to keep her off-balance and easier to control.

"This is madness. I refuse to allow it," he seethed.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm getting you out."

Her heart soared. "He'll be angry with you."

"I don't care. I'm not letting you rot down here. It's inhumane. How could he justify doing this to you?" Theo pressed on the door latch, and it popped open, obeying a Nott heir. Even if he was the spare, some of the wards sensed his secondary ownership.

Hermione trembled, oddly hesitant to step over the threshold, having stared at the delineation between her cage and freedom for too long. Theo didn't allow her to overthink, tugging her into a fierce hug, leading her upstairs on shaky legs like a newborn deer, keeping her close.

When they exited the manor into the gardens, she shielded her eyes, finding it painful. The window produced artificial sunlight, but like Luna suggested, nothing could ever compare to the real thing. Even under grey clouds, the colours glowed. Wildflowers bloomed along the hedges. Dark green. Light green. Earthy brown. It all melded together like a painting. Hermione placed a hand on her mouth with a dry sob, her body fully realising what she'd been deprived of, feeling weak.

They journeyed to their old haunts, resting next to the south pond. She soaked in the nature around her as the sun lowered: the buzz of insects, the drifting clouds, the gentle mist. Theo stewed in dark silence beside her until a crack rend the air, and Titus appeared near the edge of the pond in all his armour, looming over them with his large frame, clutching his wand as if he wished to use it.

"How dare you let her out without my permission!"

Theo jumped to his feet in front of Hermione who had to shake the sleepiness away to sit and curl her legs close. "No! How dare *you* hurt Hermione this way. It's despicable. I thought we were a family! If our mother was still alive, she'd be ashamed of you."

Facing his brother's condemnation, Titus briefly flinched.

"Careful," he warned in a dark voice

"Or what?"

Titus tucked his wand back into his holster. "Did she ever explain why she was there in the first place?"

"Nothing could justify—"

"She tried to kill me."

Theo glanced down at Hermione, waiting for her to refute it.

"I didn't," she said.

Theo recovered from his shock. "Well, that's— if she did, I'm sure she had a good reason."

"A good reason?" Titus sneered at his brother. "I've let you see her today like you begged me for weeks, despite my reservations and your previous lies, and here you go again, betraying my trust. I love you, Theo, and I always will, even if it's to my detriment sometimes, but what's between Hermione and me is *none* of your business. How I choose to handle her treachery is up to my discretion." He took in a deep breath and relaxed his stance with difficult concentration. "Now, it's time for dinner. I'd love for you to join us, because I miss you fiercely, but only if you can respect my authority over the manor and Hermione."

Theo didn't reach for his wand to fight. He glanced off into the pond, hands shaking. Maybe he was ashamed that he couldn't do more. Maybe he was ashamed that he loved Titus as much as Titus loved him. That would never change, no matter the injury or rift. Love couldn't be taken off like a discarded piece of clothing. It would ache under his ribs forever.

"I'm going back to my flat." He leaned down and kissed Hermione's cheek. "I don't share meals with dishonorable beasts."

"Theo—" Titus started. "Don't be—"

But Theo didn't stick around, apparating away in a blink. Titus stared at the empty spot his brother had stood, exposing a flicker of grief.

"Come on, get up, Sprite." When he reached down, she made the mistake of flinching from his touch. He recoiled before tugging her up anyway, pulling her close to stare down at her, hand on her shoulder, clutching the fabric damp with dew.

"Don't put me back." She rarely begged him anymore, but she didn't know if she'd mentally survive even a single additional night in the dungeon.

Titus didn't acknowledge her plea, forcing her to walk in front of him into the manor. She didn't fight. What would be the point?



Instead of the dungeon, he led her to the dining room. He pulled out the chair at her usual spot, and she sat slowly, unable to breathe, staring at him in confusion, wondering what he planned.

When Bitty brought the food, they ate in complete silence, accompanied by the occasional clink of glass or scrape of knife on porcelain.

"How was work?" she finally asked one of her usual questions, needing to put her voice to use.

"Productive." The side of his mouth almost tipped up in a grin. It was just a fraction of a second, but she caught it.

She wondered what was so *productive* about the day. What was he pleased about?

When dinner ended, he brought her to a less formal sitting room. She remained tense as they both sat on the couch, facing the fireplace.

Titus glared at the leaping flames. Hermione couldn't get comfortable, wondering when he'd take her back down. Trepidation clawed along her veins.

"I'm going to release you," he finally whispered, still deep in thought. "I was going to soon, regardless."

She thought she'd misheard him. "You told me you wouldn't."

Though she'd counted on Theo's horror to shame Titus into changing his mind, the capitulation still made her wary. She'd never told him the whole truth, and he didn't use veritaserum to verify. Or legilimency. None of it made sense.

But Titus did nothing without a reason, playing his own games. She should be happy about being out of her cage, but she sensed something off in his reasoning.

"The past is the past." He continued to stare into the fire. "And I don't want to foster further resentment between us. Not now. Not so close." He finally looked at her, calculations buried in his gaze. "I've decided to forgive you for anything you might have done behind my back, because you're not going to do anything so foolish after this. The time for goodbyes is over. Do you agree?"

Titus spoke his own half-truths. He didn't let her out on a whim, so he must have discovered some way to ensure her proper behaviour.

"I agree." Even without trusting him, she was unwilling to let this opportunity go.

"You don't have full freedom yet. Outdoor activity will be limited to a few hours a day. I'd prefer you to spend most of your time in the bedrooms or the library. Any suspicious activity will result—"

Hermione launched forward, surprising him with a kiss, intending to make him forget about restrictions. If he took the treehouse next, she didn't know what she'd do.

Titus groaned in sharp relief, starved for true affection, lips softening beneath her. The contact was brief, but it seemed to do the trick. He pulled back, hands on her cheeks, eyes flicking from her eyes to her mouth. "Please don't make me regret this."

Her scheme actually worked.

And he'd regret it. He'd regret everything he'd done to her.

She'd make sure of that.

*Step four: get out of the fucking dungeon.*

---

For the first week, Hermione used her limited time outside soaking in the sunshine, unwilling to do anything yet to draw his attention. The other hours she spent locked in her old room or the library like Titus ordered, listening as people filtered in and out, getting the manor ready for Beltane, restricted from talking to any of the hired workers.

After begging Titus for company again, Luna arrived six days before the planned event, her hair in several long braids. Pieces of dried seaweed weaved through the pale strands with shells dangling from her ears.

They began their day searching the grounds for various plants, invisible creatures, and other oddities. When Hermione turned her brain off, she actually enjoyed it.

A garden gnome defied its nature and jumped into Luna's arms near the hippogriff statue, snuggling into her offered hug like an infant.

"They've never done that with me." The gnome snapped its tiny stone teeth at Hermione when she tried to pat its head. "Vicious little things."

Hermione used their wanderings to check on the potion first. To her relief, it bubbled as it had months ago, the charms still activated in the cauldron.

Acromantula venom and Silver-Eyed Horned Toad Slime remained the only ingredients she needed to acquire. Which she'd do soon enough, if everything worked out the way she wanted.

But when she checked on the bag... it was gone.

She stared at the empty space in growing horror until it became too much, bracing herself against the mermaid statue so she didn't faint.

*Titus had found the bag.*

The elves must have stumbled on it while pruning, or maybe he'd searched for it to confirm his suspicions.

Was that why he let her out of the dungeon, thinking he'd discovered the source of the communication on his own? He'd never brought it up in conversation. Did he plan to use the

knowledge against her?

Of course, he did.

After another brief panic, Hermione calmed, realising that it didn't matter if Titus found it or not. Draco would be wary of any message that came through to him now, thinking she was still locked in the dungeon.

Thank Merlin, the potion remained concealed. She'd need to move it to more obscure locations as the elves worked to ready the gardens for the festivities.

Hermione remained near the statue for an hour, watching Luna make a flower crown for the garden gnome, while she worked out all of the possible ways Titus could use the bag against her— along with all the ways she could make his manipulations null and void.

---

After going back to the treehouse, Hermione attempted to light a candle. "Could you—"

"Oh, hello Harry," Luna said.

Hermione yelped in surprise as two bodies with disillusioned limbs appeared near the entrance to the treehouse, the cloth of the familiar invisibility cloak fluttering to the floor. She scrambled back, grasping her chest.

Harry Potter stood in front of her. Just as awkward as she remembered, shoving his glasses up his nose, hair perpetually messy.

And beside him stood Draco.

"What are you two doing here?" she said, still clutching her chest, unable to think of anything else to say in her shock. "Are you insane?"

Almost two months of true separation. She wondered if he'd counted the seconds as she had.

"Didn't I tell you she'd lecture us first?" Draco's smirked, one lip pulling up, exposing slightly sharper canines than normal.

The sun filtered through the windows, glinting off Draco's pale hair. He'd concealed his red eyes, the beautiful grey gleaming like silver. He looked healthy, besides the dark circles under his eyes, expertly hiding the dark magic thrumming in his blood, weaving up his hands to his heart.

She remained frozen as if staring at a mirage in the desert, continually blinking her eyes until her brain caught up to reality.

His stare pinned her in place. "Are you going to fucking kiss me or not, Granger?"

The words broke something inside her, cracking through her shock, and she rushed forward. He caught her as she jumped, wrapping her legs around his waist, kissing his cheek bones, his sharp nose, his beautiful lips.

"I'm sorry," he groaned.

"For what?" She could barely get the words out, unwilling to let her lips disconnect from his skin.

"The dungeon."

"I forgive you."

"Don't. It was all my fault. Yell at me."

"You—" kiss. "Insufferable—" kiss. "Arse!"

"Say it again. It wasn't self-righteous enough."

"You could have gotten yourself killed!"

"There we go. Finally." He closed his eyes, as if no longer able to hold his occlumency to hide his eyes and then snapped them back open. "My father would have thrashed me for acting on emotion like I did. I just couldn't— seeing him do that to you—"

She stopped kissing him, and he trailed off, realising they had an audience.

Harry's cheeks had turned bright red, and he focused intensely on the terrariums, as if the crickets proved fascinating. Luna blinked dreamily at their reunion, her stare quite invasive, though the gnome in her arms, with his hat wrapped in a flower crown, grimaced in disgust.

Draco lowered her legs from his waist reluctantly, but kept her close.

"How did you even get onto the grounds?" she asked. She'd already told Draco all the issues getting in and out of the manor.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "The redirection spell was easy enough to get around, especially with the cloak. And then we slipped through the second ward hole you told Malfoy about. Draco forced Theo to give him a little blood to put on the cloak just in case. The entrance was a bit tricky to find, but since we knew the general area from your previous descriptions, it didn't take long."

"You risked your neck for a theory?"

"Well, yes." Harry answered, as if that were entirely normal for him. "We meant to get down to the dungeons to find you, but then we miraculously saw you walking out of the maze."

"Are you suicidal? The wards would have decapitated you the moment you stepped foot past the threshold of the manor without permission. Did you even have a solid plan?"

House wards had layers, getting more complex and dangerous for uninvited guests the deeper a person travelled, especially ancient ones like the Notts'.

"I had a few, of course," Draco reassured her. "Luckily, I didn't have to attempt any."

“And you?” she pointed a finger at Harry, who looked chagrined.

“Honestly, I thought we could just figure it out as we went.”

“Unbelievable!” Hermione threw up her hands in exasperation before something occurred to her. “And both of you fit under one cloak?”

“It was a tight squeeze,” Harry admitted, and then glanced at Draco. “I feel like we finally bonded under the rough conditions.”

Draco sneered at the accusation. “There was *no* bonding, Potter. We’re not friends, and we never will be. Just business associates. We have similar goals, and that’s it. I endure your presence for your cloak. And after today, I’m never getting that close to you again.”

“We’ll see if you change your mind on the journey home.” Harry gave a wink to Hermione, showing he still did everything possible to get under Draco’s skin, just like at Hogwarts.

“Enough of this,” Draco spat. “We’re running out of time. We never planned to get you out of the dungeons, Granger. It would be a useless risk while you were wearing this.” He brushed a thumb along the universe necklace, eyeing it in distaste. “We need Nott incapacitated first. I only intended to find where you hid the potion, so that I could finish it myself. From my sources, Nott will be gone for only an hour, which leaves forty-five minutes to solidify our schemes— multiple ones.”

“Well,” Hermione grinned, finally in her element, excited to begin. “Let’s get on with it.”

---

They sat in a circle with Hermione perched in Draco’s lap, unable to stop touching him, lighting a few candles. Harry brought out a quill and parchment, and Draco unfolded an ancient blueprint of the Nott grounds that he’d somehow obtained. They argued as they talked about plans, stabbing at the parchment to make their points.

“The potion is the most important problem right now,” Hermione interrupted. “Without finishing it, everything else falls apart. I still need Silver-Eyed Horned Toad Slime and—”

“Acromantula venom.” Draco fished into his pocket, extracting a vial, filled with clear liquid that sizzled and popped in its glass confines.

Hermione tugged it out of his hands, cradling it close as if it was an entire vault of treasures. “How did you get this?”

“Though hard to obtain, it’s not impossible. Acromantulas crawl all over the Forbidden Forest, and if you can’t capture a live one large enough to produce substantial venom, the centaurs occasionally trade.”

He downplayed the acquisition. Centaurs were incredibly volatile creatures. Titus considered them just as invasive as Acromantulas, though he let them live in peace for now, unwilling to waste resources to evict them from the forest. Despite the imprecise craft of scrying the stars,

the creatures only worked with humans if they felt fate aligned. Otherwise, the foolish wizards who tried to initiate contact never exited the forest, impaled with their arrows.

“You risked the centaurs,” she said in shock. Finding a real Acromantula might have been safer.

“Not without weighing the risk, but I counted on the fact that anyone who wanted to fight against the Death Eaters in power would be advantageous to the fate of their species.” He pulled down the side of his shirt, displaying a large cut on his shoulder. “I was right, though they didn’t let me leave without a warning.”

Hermione gasped, gliding her fingers over the tender, raw wound without touching.

“They hated the smell of my blood.” Volatile dark magic. Another potential dark lord. Draco grasped her hand, kissing the tips of her fingers one by one. “I’ve been unable to get the slime.”

Hermione suspected that, but she needed to confirm her theory to proceed. As a potions master, Draco had the connections to track down the rarest ingredients. “What do your sources say?”

“The slime is possibly the most controlled substance in the entirety of the curse boundary. There are only a few known vials, and all of them are currently in the possession of our ministry, under the authority of the DMLE.” Draco gave her a knowing glance. “Only Mediators have access— one in particular.”

“Where would Nott keep something like that?” Harry asked. “Do you think it’s in the ministry or maybe a vault—”

“Titus doesn’t trust anybody to safekeep his most valued possessions, not even the goblins at Gringotts.” Hermione thought of Atherol Nott, brandishing his sword, and a dragon breathing splintered fire. “No, he’d keep it close. Right under his nose.”

For once, Titus’ intense need for control would benefit her.

“And how would you get it?” Harry asked.

“All magic has loopholes.”

“Don’t put yourself at risk,” Draco said. “We can always get you out another way if things fall through.”

Hermione shook her head. Staying wasn’t an option. There would only be more complications tying her to Nott manor if she did. A calculated risk and a fragile hope were the only things she possessed.

“Are you ready to finally hear *my* plan?” She picked up the quill Luna had cast aside and placed it on the parchment. “I must warn you that it’s a bit mad, a tad reckless.” She began writing, outlining each of the steps. “And just enough *muggle* to maybe fool the Butcher.”

All four of them, along with the garden gnome, leaned forward to concentrate.

*Step five: solidify her plans.*

---

Two days before Beltane, Hermione dreamed of Draco.

“I don’t want you to leave. I feel like I’m dying here without you.” It was the same words she’d said after their session scheming in the treehouse, clinging to him in desperation, trying to memorize him under her fingertips.

“Don’t let him steal your soul, your determination. It’s almost over.” He closed his eyes in pain and kissed her. “I’m not sure what he’s made you do since capturing you, but I saw what he did at the club. You need to know it’s not your fault.” He grasped her cheeks to force her to look at him, as her eyes went blurry with unshed tears. “Do you hear me? Nott’s taken away what little agency you ever had. He’s stolen everything. Your autonomy. Your choice. Whatever happens, *it’s not your fault*. One day, you’ll have your revenge. I promise you this.”

Her dream shifted into what she never said. “What do you think Titus is planning to bribe me with?”

Because he was. They all schemed, stumbling in the dark, attempting to guess the next move.

Draco just stared at her, eyes like mercury. “You already know.”

That was when she woke up with a jolt, gasping in shock. She’d been sleeping in the library, nose in a book, drooling along the pages. Her subconscious picked the situation apart before her conscious mind.

Draco was right— she did already know.

Titus’ good moods. His patience and forgiveness. It had nothing to do with the bag.

He’d already told her that he’d find a way to convince her to comply. He also said he wouldn’t let her out without *ensuring* her proper behaviour.

With Lucius in the picture, he couldn’t kill or arrest Draco without solid proof, and he refused to use any information that might lead to his precious Sprite.

Titus must have discovered something that she hadn’t thought about to incriminate him. Something even the pureblood society would find too far. Something even Lucius couldn’t brush under the rug.

Titus didn’t plan to kill Draco like she’d originally feared.

No, he’d arrest him and then use the situation to bribe her into a marriage vow. All he needed was her verbal permission. Like Angel warned, in absence of her affection, he’d resort to

manipulating her into physical intimacy, believing himself experienced enough to make her body betray her.

And his instincts proved correct. Hermione would sacrifice everything to protect Draco, even her freedom. Even her soul.

A secondary realisation almost brought on a panic attack— Titus needed to arrest Draco before Beltane for the scheme to work, probably using his sentencing as an integral part of the negotiations.

He'd probably initiate the arrest at the last second possible, so that neither of them crafted another plan to escape his machinations.

Hermione refused to let that happen. The Order didn't have enough love for Draco to risk getting him out of Azkaban.

She'd truly be alone and backed into a corner and left with no agency ever again.

Hermione rubbed her fingers together, wishing she had a wand to twirl in agitation, understanding what she needed to do.

Hermione walked along the endless shelves, stopping in a section she hadn't ventured often, because she'd once been banned. In an experiment, she reached for the book she wanted. Her hand grasped the spine and tugged it off the shelf without resistance.

It didn't surprise her that Titus allowed her access now, given what it contained.

However, Hermione doubted he'd expect for her to use his own methods against him.

---

The day before Beltane, Hermione woke in Titus' bed, his side still warm but empty. The workers stayed busy through the morning and afternoon, scrubbing the floors, extending the ballroom, and polishing the silver, while she remained in her library like he ordered.

Shortly after the hired workers left, Bitty apparated into her room, announcing dinner. The floor squeaked as Hermione travelled the corridors to the dining room, the manor gleaming in a way she'd never seen before, years of layered dust wiped away.

She found Titus waiting for her, his stare piercing as she took her seat. This time her gaze lingered on him too, but not in affection. She tracked his movement as a lion, scenting a trail of blood.

Their conversation remained banal: the weather, his day, her day. Everything they wished to say remained unsaid until the end.

Titus leaned back in his chair, tensing up. "Tomorrow—"

"I know what tomorrow is."

"You don't need to be nervous."



“I’m not.” A slow simmering fury, buried deep in her psyche, growing like a tumour through the years, replaced nerves with steel.

He studied her for a moment as if to wade through the truth and lies. “Even so, I feel the need to reassure you, because I won’t be able to do so tonight.”

“You’ll be gone?”

“Unfortunately, my work never sleeps.”

Just as she suspected.

Hermione kept still. "Will it be dangerous?"

He probably hoped for a vicious fight.

“There’s nothing to be worried about. I’ll come home to you.”

He would— much sooner than he believed.

---

Hermione watched as Titus readied himself, snapping on his armour, checking his holstered wand and knives hidden around his body. His cloak wrapped around his shoulder, black mask gliding in place. As always, the gloves slid on his hands at the end, the process a methodical dance she’d witnessed so many times it became rote.

He didn’t say goodbye this time, marching to the front sitting room, boots clicking harder on the floor than normal.

When the floo crackled, Hermione journeyed to her room, digging through her wardrobe until she found the items she needed.

She remained in place for several minutes as she waited, knowing her plan couldn't happen too soon or too late. Most auror missions had to be perfectly timed. Once given the green light, he’d storm the manor in silence after forcing Lucius' hand, using deals and bribery to achieve his goals.

Hermine wanted Titus so close that the taste of impending violence lingered on his tongue, the blood lust thrumming, so that when she ripped it away, he mourned the loss.

When her count finally ended, she dressed as methodically as Titus, as if putting on armour for a battle.

"Bitty," she called after donning the red cloak. It trailed along the floor behind her, the velvet soft against her skin.

Her nanny elf popped into the room with a surprised face, since she rarely asked for her assistance at night.

"Yes, Mistress?"

Hermione held out a formal envelope with Titus' name scrawled elegantly on the front. A red wax seal, stamped with the Nott crest, held it together.

"Give this to Titus."

"Master Titus is at work."

"I know," she said. "Tell him to respond right away. Make sure to stress that he needs to meet me in his mother's sitting room, or the terms are forfeit forever."

The elf hesitated, an oddity. "Master Titus told Bitty that she should never interrupt him at work unless it's a dire emergency."

"It is a *dire* emergency."

Bitty's ears shook in doubt, but she raised her little arm and popped away as ordered.

Like a wraith, Hermione pulled up her hood, covering her features.

---

Hermione stood before the familiar ballerina, studying the cost of potential failure, watching her twirl and pirouette in endless loops. The fire crackled to her side, giving a soft warmth to the room, which contained no other light. Through the large picture window, she viewed the unicorn statue, blanketed in the dark. A subtle twinkle of stars winked at her, the moon peeking out from shifting clouds.

A pop, and Titus landed heavily behind her without stumbling, unstable magic crackling around him. She turned to find him looking like a warlord in his full Death Eater armour. Only his blue eyes flashed through the slits of his mask, narrowed on her in chilling anger, clutching the letter in his fist. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I thought I made it obvious."

"Yes, you wish to state your terms to enter into an arrangement. I'm thrilled you're finally coming to your senses. Any smart witch would have a few demands before a formal union. But we could've had this conversation *tomorrow*." He threw the letter down, discarding it. "You timed this on purpose to distract me. Such a conniving little witch. I should have ignored it."

"Yet you came anyway." Just as she thought he would. "How close were you?"

"Close enough. Don't think this delay will save him." He paused, thinking things over. "How did you find out what I'd planned? It couldn't have been from this." He reached into the pocket of his trousers and extracted a small familiar ear. "I found it two weeks ago in a search through my study, and soon found the connecting piece in your room."

Hermione froze as he crushed the device in his hand, scattering its remnants next to the discarded letter.

"A brilliant prototype," he continued. "A Weasley invention, no doubt. We've now found similar ones hidden on ministry spies." He glared at her again. "Did you get the ear from Malfoy through the bag I also found?"

By his self-satisfied expression, he knew she'd probably searched and found that missing too.

Hermione stared at the crumbled remains of the listening device, needing to protect Lily, keeping her eyes lowered, refusing to answer.

He rolled his shoulders, releasing some tension. "I'd intended to ignore the spying, since it answered many of my questions without having to extract them from you. But I might as well ask— is this how Malfoy and the Order acquired their information?"

Hermione's shock turned to cold anger. It meant nothing to keep her secrets anymore. He'd untangle them soon enough. Above all else, she *wanted* him to know before tomorrow. "Not entirely. I also decoded the missives and files at the ministry. You were careless about throwing them in my path."

Only the crackle of the fire could be heard for several long moments.

"That's impossible. You were elf-monitored the whole time, and I encrypted them myself."

"It wasn't *that* complex. You only used an alphabetic cipher with a few variations. Simple enough to solve by keeping careful attention to patterns. The code after that proved a bit trickier, but that was conquered soon too." No need to tell him about Draco's involvement in the last part.

"Always so *clever*, aren't you?" He ripped off his mask, attaching it to his belt, exposing every line of anger in his features, shoulders now tight as a bow string. He shed his gloves next, placing them in his pocket.

"Did you honestly believe I wasn't planning to stab you in the back like you stabbed mine? After what you did to me, you deserve far worse."

"Is this what you wanted?" he flung out his arm. "To air out our grievances?"

"No," she shook her head. "Like I wrote, I'm here to offer you a deal."

His occlumency snapped into place, all business. "What are your terms?"

She clutched her cloak tight, knowing she played a delicate game. "First, drop the charges on Draco."

"Why the fuck would I ever do that?" He took a heavy step toward her, and the fire silhouetted him. "I think you're miscalculating how much I loathe Malfoy. Beyond earning your favour, the only thing driving me is seeing him once again in chains. The price to prevent that would be steep."

"And *I* think you're miscalculating how little I plan to obey you if you do that." She gave a sneer that would make Draco proud. "How often have I already gotten around your silly rules and boundaries? Do you think a marriage vow could truly control me? That I couldn't think of ways around the restrictions again? You keep me so bored that's all I have time to do! You'd have to keep me in the dungeon, like you fear, because if you arrest Draco, I will never cease to make your life agony."

He scoffed as if he didn't believe her. "So pointlessly dramatic. I wasn't going to kill the wanker."

"Oh, I know." Because then he'd lose all leverage over her. "What were the charges against him tonight?"

She'd thought hard about that. Unmasking him as the Reaper might be impossible, unless caught in front of witnesses. Due to Lucius, extensive proof would need to be submitted to the Wizengamot for them to take Titus seriously. And it would hurt his reputation if things went wrong. Not to mention, the loose threads might tangle up with his Sprite, and obviously he couldn't have that.

"Why should I tell you?" he snapped.

"What does it matter now?"

Titus seemed finished with hiding his secrets too. "Malfoy made the simple mistake of financing the Order. One of his townhomes is the base, and he's employed several muggles in London to distribute what he can't, contributing to their spy network."

Hermione didn't anticipate that. His townhome—the one she'd planned to utilize helping the muggles. Was he still working with Amy, the shopkeeper she'd met in muggle London? She wished she could ask Draco the details. Her heart swelled and dropped just thinking about it, realizing even after she'd backed away, he'd taken over the operation.

She glared at Titus, and he returned it with a cruel smirk. "How did you find out?"

"Galleons always leave a trail, no matter how subtle."

The charges for funding the Order could be as little as a small stint in Azkaban or as great as an execution, depending on how much evidence Titus meant to present.

"I realize you have your own terms you want to offer," Titus started, crossing his arms along his chest, readjusting his stance. "But if we're going to negotiate, then I'm going to list mine first. Here's the facts— though I only planned to submit enough documentation to facilitate his arrest and a search of his manor, I have enough damning evidence to have Malfoy publicly tortured— possibly executed. Whether I arrest him tonight or tomorrow or in a month, that fact still stands. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"Yes."

“As hard as it is to believe, I don't want Malfoy dead, no matter the crimes he's committed. Not yet, at least, especially with how low pureblood numbers are. He's the heir to two great wizarding lines. Unfortunately, if Malfoy remains out of Azkaban, there's a good chance I'd kill him sooner than later, so it's best for everyone involved that he's locked away until he's learned some lessons. To make you and his father happy, I promise he'll be given a comfortable cell with every amenity at hand, free of dementors, practically a vacation. More than the piece of shit deserves, for sure. And it wouldn't be forever. A year at the most... though I could add more.”

He always knew what to say to justify everything he did, as if he was doing her and Draco a favor.

She crossed her arms, mirroring him. “And if I don't comply, what will you do?”

“The dementors like dark magic, and the fucker must reek of it. In the bowels of Azkaban, there are levels where no light enters, no visitors allowed. The torment could be unimaginable.” He relaxed. “So do you accept my deal? A cushy sentence for just a year. In exchange, you'll enter an arranged marriage with me.” His expression softened. “For my part, I promise to weather your inevitable anger with patience and gentleness, as I always do. I'll be your rock, your steady foundation. Everything you need me to be, I'll become. Just... give me a chance to love you properly without interference.”

The small shift in his feet betrayed his rare nerves. He'd been waiting for this moment for a long time, intending to give her the ultimatum after Draco had been arrested, leaving her no choice but to protect him.

Titus thought he could manipulate her with promises of eternal love and lenient sentences.

"I refuse your deal."

He drew back, surprised. "Don't be foolish. You'd be damning him to terrible conditions for your pride."

"Go ahead, damn him— but then you'll damn me too. While you may not be willing to implicate me in any official capacity, I'll find a way to give a confession for my crimes just for spite. Dolohov wouldn't place me in Azkaban, but he'd make you take one of my fingers. Which one would you choose, hm? And then you can decide which toe. Because I wouldn't stop, until you've mutilated every part of me. And if all else fails, I'd find a way to end my life permanently."

His face drained of color as she spoke. The horror of what he imagined played on his face. "I wouldn't let you."

“I'd find a way,” she reiterated. “I always do.”

“You're bluffing.”

"Then call my bluff." She let the silence linger long enough for him to realize the stakes. "If you don't mind, I'd like to finish stating *my* deal."

He exposed a flash of teeth in a frustrated grimace. "Go on."

"There are three options for your future, and I'm willing to give you only one of them tomorrow without a fight as long as you drop the charges on Draco tonight."

"Already this is sounding unreasonable, but alright, I'll play along." He raised an eyebrow. "What are they?"

"Your first option is an unbreakable vow— just like the one we'd made together before the final Trial. I'm willing to promise you my fidelity. You'd never have to worry about me physically straying, and I'm sure you could throw in a line or two about staying away from the Order. Much more effective than a marriage spell, I think. There'd be no way to get around the terms without great risk."

Titus seemed impressed, his shoulders relaxing just a little. "And the second option?"

"A baby."

"That's not an option," he scoffed. "That's a requirement. I'm not going to give the ministry any reason to punish you or take you away from me." His eyes seemed brighter than normal, as if amused. "Especially since I've already severed Malfoy's bond and intend to place my own on you tomorrow."

He said that as if that revelation should have unravelled everything she'd planned.

"I suppose that would be a smart plan." Hermione gave a soft laugh. "That is if Draco had ever bonded with me in the first place."

A beat of silence.

"Don't try to lie to me." Titus narrowed his eyes in confusion. "I saw him do it on the night of the ritual. It couldn't have been a trick."

"No, you saw him apply a binding spell, but he didn't bind me to him." She placed a hand over her heart for emphasis. "He bound me to myself. All decisions of fertility are in my hands. They always have been."

Titus shook his head as if he couldn't believe it. "But... you had a fever?"

It was her turn to grin. "As you know, the Weasley twins' inventions truly are something else. A chocolate that imitates illness! I bet they would've made a fortune at Hogwarts with kids who want to skive off class."

Titus' chest visibly rose and fell, clenching his fists. As if he desired to kill someone. "The authorities—"

"Oh, bugger off! Stop with the trite lines, because I don't believe them anymore. You *are* the fucking authority. Don't pretend you can't twist the rules to suit yourself. No one is coming to investigate you." Hermione took a sharp breath to rebuild her resolve. "So let me reiterate — I'll allow you to get me pregnant if you choose the option. Otherwise, unless you find a

counter spell, which may take *years*, you're out of luck. And since this particular binding is driven by voluntary agreement, if you don't choose it, I swear on Finch's grave that I'll never carry your heir. I don't care what you threaten me with."

He glanced down at her flat stomach, covered by the cloak, as if imagining it rounded, heavy with his baby. Something of him growing inside of her, connecting them forever.

Oh, he wanted it badly.

"And the third option?" His voice was gruff.

"An enthusiastic *fuck*."

He jolted at the word, and then he slowly grinned. "Isn't that what I'd already get with the vow? Feels redundant."

"No, a vow gets you a promise of fidelity and a measure of control. That's it. The second option would be a baby. Neither require much of my participation besides lying there like a corpse. Sure, you could probably make me respond in some way, but there'd be no initiation or participation on my part."

"Only one fuck?"

"The enthusiasm would be permanent," she clarified. "Just imagine— you could have me on my knees whenever you want. Or perhaps, I'd be waiting in bed for you to get home from work, already touching myself in anticipation. I could be just your needy, bored little pet, begging for her master to play with her."

Titus' head tilted down as she talked, eyes shadowed. His hand closed around the top of his armour near his collarbone, as if to rip it off. "I choose all of them. I won't settle for less."

"That's not how this will work. If you want me to comply without a fight, then you'll drop the charges against Draco, and in return, you can pick *one* of the options, which will be performed tomorrow with the rites."

"All of them," he snapped.

"One."

He let go of his armour and reached down for his mask clipped on his belt. "I'll call your bluff then. Draco will be arrested tonight. I'll have your vow tomorrow, your participation, and I also plan to place the future Nott heir inside you before the night is through, no matter what I need to do to coerce you."

"You'll stay." Hermione shrugged off her red cloak, the fabric pooling around her feet like a puddle of blood. "Or you won't get anything."

Titus' body froze, jaw slackening. His hand let go of his mask, and it clattered to the floor.

The fire warmed her exposed skin, illuminating the pale bathing costume. The last time she'd seen it her doppelgänger had been wearing it while kneeling in the study, swallowing his cock.

Having been years since she'd worn it, it stretched impossibly tighter than before— much too tight— showing every dip and curve, breasts almost spilling out, nipples starting to harden from her nerves under the almost translucent fabric.

“What are you intending?” his voice sounded strangled.

He wouldn't leave now. Not with her nearly naked, dressed as his naughtiest fantasy.

Hermione walked to the red velvet settee and sat, crossing her legs, both hands on her knees in a regal pose. “We're going to finish our negotiation.”

He hesitated, eyes trailing from her mouth to each breast and then to the hidden apex of her thighs where the fabric compressed her so snugly, it caused a tingle when she moved. “I'm listening.”

“Then show me how well you can do that and get on your knees.”

“Sprite—”

“*Get on your knees.*”

His face warred between irritation and amusement, but eventually he did as she demanded, slowly lowering himself, until his knees touched the cold floor. “Is this what arouses you? Ordering me around?”

The power did prove headier than she expected.

She sneered at him, ignoring his teasing. “Now crawl to me.”

“Are you sure you want to play these games with me?” He asked without moving.

“If you want to get near me,” she wove her words like a spider's web. “*Then crawl.*”

“I'm going to remember this when it's my turn.” He glared at her, darkened eyes briefly flashing blue in the firelight with each movement forward. When he reached the settee, she stopped him with her foot on his chest.

“No further.”

He cradled her foot and gently took off her slipper, kissing along the delicate bones up to her ankle.

“And no touching.” She grabbed his hair and tugged his head back roughly. “Choose your fate.”



“You’ve always been a ruthless negotiator.” He displayed his teeth as if wishing to lean forward and bite her skin. “As you wish... if you grant me two of the options, I’ll drop the charges tonight.”

She’d started her terms low on purpose, giving her room to control the bargain, knowing he’d push for more.

Even though it was all a ploy, her plan had worked, keeping him at home. What did it matter if she relented? “You promise not to arrest him tonight or tomorrow or even in a month?”

“I can’t promise about any future infractions, but anything before this will be granted a rare pardon from me.”

That was all she needed.

“Then I’ll allow you to have two options,” she agreed. “But before we talk any further, you need to take off my shackles.”

“That’s too far.”

“We’ll do this as equals or not at all. A wizard afraid of a witch’s magic doesn’t deserve her.” Her grip tightened in his hair, probably hurting him, but he didn’t flinch. “Are you a coward?”

They both waited, until he furrowed his brow and reached into his cloak, coming out with his wand and the Black key. “Any curses—”

“I’m not an idiot. I couldn’t curse a Nott heir with anything more serious than a silencio in his own home without permission. The wards would retaliate. I bet you’ve made failsafes to protect me from evisceration, but I’d still most likely be petrified and bound, correct.”

“Correct.” He kept her stare as he unsnapped one shackle and then the other, allowing the goblin-made obsidian to clatter to the floor. The magic prickled painfully as it returned, and she sucked in a breath through her teeth with the feeling.

Finished with the task, he placed the wand on the floor next to his knee, returning the key to his pocket.

“What is your first choice?” she asked, releasing his hair.

He pretended to wrap his hands around her ankles, the fingers so close to her skin, they warmed her with heat, but like she’d ordered, he didn’t touch. Merely ghosted the phantom contact up her shins to her knees. “A vow.”

She’d expected that. Above all else, Titus craved true control over her. A marriage vow may work to an extent, but not with the same assurance as an unbreakable one. He’d devour the opportunity she offered.

“It will be yours tomorrow night.” She attempted to keep her breathing even, but it hitched as his fingers glided past her knee, somehow leaving a tingling fire in their wake trailing to the

bare skin of her thighs. “What is your second choice?”

“I’d like to see you pregnant with my child.”

She’d expected that too, probably assured he’d crack through her walls eventually.

Hermione relaxed, which was the wrong move. The moment she slumped, Titus grabbed the fabric at the small of her back, pushing her forward to the edge of the settee. Her thighs spread from the force, straddling his thick chest, his mouth hovering over hers.

“No touching,” she reminded.

“I’m not.”

Technically, it was true. His hands only pressed against the fabric of her bathing costume, and her legs brushed against his armour. Their breath mingled as she panted, trying to remain in control.

“You didn’t let me finish,” his stare stuck to her mouth with hunger. “Of course, I’d like to see you pregnant with my child, but I want to own your pleasure more.”

He ducked his head low, and before she could stop him, he playfully nipped at her breast. The sensation tugged on her stomach, branching outward across her chest and down.

“I told you—”

“Ah, but I’m still not truly touching you.” He nipped again, harder this time, pulling the fabric of her bathing costume. She tried to wiggle away as if a predator’s teeth grazed her jugular, but he kept her locked in place.

Unable to stop him, Hermione sucked at her bottom lip to prevent a reaction.

Titus’ head dipped further, continuing to nip on her bathing costume right below her breasts. The skin beneath tingled in an odd state of brief pain that travelled along her body, every nerve on edge.

“The deal was for tomorrow,” she managed to get out, unable to stop a shiver.

“And if I told you I want a taste today to show me you’re serious?”

Her mind remained fuzzy with growing tension, but started to work, remembering the plan B she’d thought up, just in case he tried anything too serious, knowing she tested a thief in his own element.

Hermione bit down hard on her bottom lip, smarting with sharp pain— hard enough the wound began to bleed. As her mouth flooded with the taste of metal, she raised her wrists and gave a simple swish and flick, completing the charm she’d practiced from the book in the library.

“I wouldn’t even have to touch your skin. I could lick your pretty pussy just like this.” He glanced up through thick lashes. Instead of a nip, he extended his tongue, touching the tip to the middle of her stomach, trailing slowly down, keeping her stare as if daring her to stop him.

She refused to let him have control this time.

A shadow exited her palm and sunk under his clothes

Titus grabbed his wand like a flash and grasped her left wrist hard, sitting back with a glare. “I warned you—”

But it wasn’t a curse and she was faster, spitting the blood from her split lip on his hair, the skin of her palm warmed as the shadow wrapped around his cock.

He straightened in confusion, but it didn’t last long. “You finally discovered the spell I used on you.” He let go of her wrist and flicked his thumb on his cheek where the small droplets of her blood lingered, giving a slow grin. “I wondered how long it would take you. I admit I was hopeful one day you’d exact revenge, though I didn’t expect for you to use blood magic. How very *very* naughty.”

She’d known he wanted her to play with the carnal spells eventually, because he’d lifted the restrictions on that section in the library, probably hoping her natural curiosity would win.

The spell she used produced the same shadow hands as the one Titus cast before the Ministry ball, except when paired with the casters’ blood, it transformed into an imitation of the caster’s body—close enough to tease—controlled by her thoughts.

“I thought you wanted a preview of what you’re buying?”

He frowned. “I’m not buying—”

His words cut off when she curled her fingers around air, moving her wrist up and down, as if stroking him. “Tell me—how does my hand feel?”

Even under his dark clothes, she could see the bulge in his trousers growing harder with each tug. “Just as I thought it would be.”

“And how does this feel?” Hermione brought her fingers up to her lips and gave a strong lick with her tongue, swirling around the nail as if teasing the tip.

“Bloody fuck.” Titus sighed and leaned his head back, showing the strained tendons in his neck.

“Look at me.”

He glanced down as she ordered, appearing tormented as she slowly—ever so slowly—pressed two fingers into the wet heat of her mouth until she almost gagged, giving a deep suck. He rolled his eyes up briefly as she continued, increasing the intensity.

She shouldn't find this so thrilling— the power.

It made her want to be vicious.

As if unable to stop himself, he tugged his belt open and then unzipped his trousers.

“I didn't say you could get undressed.” Her teeth grazed her fingers with a warning, giving torturous sucks with each word, watching as he shifted his hips forward seeking more of the sensation. His unfastened trousers fell down his hips enough to expose his trunks beneath, and he palmed his hard cock, adjusting himself into a more comfortable position, giving low groans as her fingers went deeper down her throat.

Hermione desired to see him fracture.

“Now I want you to imagine cumming inside my mouth,” she whispered, sliding the fingers with a slow lick as if tasting his length. “And I'll show you how I like to swallow every last drop.”

“As much as I enjoy seeing this new side of you—” He peered at her with eyes almost black with shadows and gleaming with cruelty. “I want to play too.”

Faster than she could stop him, he lunged down for his wand, flicking the same spell at her like lightning, spitting his blood on her cheek. A reciprocal shadow slipped under her thin bathing costume and entered her without mercy or warning.

She gasped in surprise, caught off guard, legs spreading on instinct to accommodate him. The sensation felt different than the last time. Before, his shadow could have been anything, morphing into what Titus ordered, though it always remained ill-defined.

This time the mimic of two solid fingers, warm and tangible as flesh, replaced the nebulous shapes of the past.

The blood he'd spit on her dripped down her cheek, but she refused to release her concentration to wipe it away. “I didn't say you could—”

By his side, Titus curled two of his fingers, stroking her inner walls in expert movements. The phantom edges of the Nott signet ring pressed against her entrance, stretching her even more.

She grasped the edge of the settee to ground herself.

“Turnabout is fair play.”

“Get back on your—”

“You don't get to make all the rules.” With a rough jerk to her foot, she slid off the settee into his arms. He yanked her legs up and open, placing her on her back, settling between spread thighs. “Not when I have you right where you belong.”

With a single hand, he yanked off his cloak and unsnapped his armour, as if they restricted him. After discarding both to the side, he pulled his dark undershirt up from his back, pulling it over his head, ruffling his curls, leaving his chest bare.

Trying to push him away in anger, she placed a hand on his taut stomach. He looked at the point of contact, slowly dragging his bottom lip out between his teeth, as if imagining other things he could be doing with his mouth. He leaned down to capture her lips with his own.

“No kissing.” She turned her face to the side. Unwilling to give him the upper hand, she twisted her hips hard. Even using all her strength, she suspected Titus allowed the motion, ending with him on his back, the flickering fire behind them, warming her skin as she straddled his stomach. He held her legs tight enough against him that she wouldn’t be able to get up unless he let go.

Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she glared down at him, digging her nails into his skin.

“You’re going to need to be more specific,” he warned. “Because there’s more than one place to *kiss*.” To prove his point, he tilted his head to the right, giving a soft brush of his lips to her wrist with a taunting glare of his own.

“Nothing about tonight will be intimate—”

“Then it can be purely physical.” His fingers vanished from inside her, replaced with the tip of his cock brushing against her entrance. The message was clear.

From the beginning, she knew the only way to keep Draco free tonight would be to provide some form of release. The shadows provided a perfect solution: a replication of her body, but not truly her.

If he wanted the fake sensation of fucking her, then she’d be in charge of it.

Hermione lifted her hips, letting go of his shoulder to clutch his throat, uncaring if she hurt him.

“Look at me as you do it,” he demanded. “I need to see you.”

The ensuing stare felt like a duel, each of them with their mental wands out, ready to battle.

“This isn’t really me,” she reminded, allowing her hips to sink down just a little. “Just my ghost.” She took her time lowering herself, and his shadow entered her at the same pace. The mimic of him, warm and hard, filled her inch by inch, until she felt impossibly full, almost splitting at the seams, just as it had in his office at the ministry. Her hands trembled, and she found it hard to think.

Their spells intertwined, as if by legilimency, reciprocating subconsciously. Once completely seated inside her, Titus closed his eyes in victory, giving a soft groan in pleasure.

“Even as a shadow, your cunt is so tight,” he seemed in pain. “After tomorrow, I won’t want to be anywhere else.”

“I hate when you speak.” Her hips rolled to shut him up. After that, both of them focused on their movements and the give and take. Her world narrowed with physical euphoria, giving in to animal instinct.

Titus let her have control, and then he took over. His grip transferred from her thighs, lifting her waist, as if she weighed nothing, guiding her down, forcing a soft cry from her.

She tried to direct the movements again, leaving scratches down his chest.

In punishment, he pressed her hips down against his true erection, her bathing costume tight against his trunks. And then he tugged her up, forcing her clit to rub against his hardened length.

“Nothing real,” she reminded. The words came out as a plea.

“I’m tired of you ordering me around.” Before she could stop him, he roughly shoved her off him. She landed on her back and without giving her a second to reorient herself, he flipped her on her stomach, pinning her shoulders down. Twisting his hand into her curls at the base of her skull to keep her still, he raised her hips, positioning her so that his erection pressed against her. The movements were so fast, so forceful, that on an instinctive level she was reminded how much stronger he was than her—how he could truly do what he wished. No amount of fighting could escape his hold. Not even retaliating with magic could save her.

Even through the drugging cloud of arousal, a terrifying thought occurred that he might go ahead and take what he wanted. Shove aside the thin cloth of her bathing costume and enter her for real.

“You don’t have to be scared of submitting to me.” He must sense her sudden fear, causing her to freeze like a gazelle cradled in a lion’s jaw. “If you let it, it can be a powerful state. Everything you’re searching for. Trust me. Stop thinking. Let me lead.”

“The deal—”

He cut her off with a shushing sound. “I won’t push beyond the boundary you placed. Nothing real will happen, except our mutual pleasure. Let go. For once, give me control.”

She trembled. The shadow of his cock still filled her, and terror wrapped close with the desire and slight pain, a potent cocktail, begging her for more. She’d be lying if she claimed she didn’t ache too—sensations she couldn’t control, made from stimulation to her body.

What did it matter if she did as he desired? Nothing was truly taken, and nothing truly given.

Hermione slowly let her legs fall further open, softening her stance like releasing a breath, showing she’d give him this imitation of intimacy, the ghost of which she hoped would haunt him for life.

“There you go,” his hold on her tightened. “My pretty, brave witch, already showing how well she’ll take me.”

The praise burned through her. She tried to resist it, but it felt like a fire spreading along her veins. She needed him to stop talking.

“Just start,” she tried to sound demanding, but it came out breathy, a plea.

“Always so impatient and bratty,” he sounded amused. The shadow cock exited her. “You’ve wasted years with a *boy* who didn’t know how to handle you.” He thrust the shadow back inside her, stealing her breath. “And now I’m going to show you how it feels to be fucked by a *man*.”

He moved brutally, without time to think or protest, knowing just the angle for the shadow to penetrate deeper, using the pressured tug on her hair to keep her anchored in place, adjusting her when he wanted, forcing her to arch her back to take more. A dull pain zipped down her spine, but it didn’t detract from the overpowering, hated bliss. Her arms kept reaching forward as if to grasp for stability with each rough jolt, finding nothing to hold onto, and he gave no mercy.

It didn’t take long for her to orgasm, especially when the shadows also extended to pluck at her nipples and clit, his spell far more advanced and experienced than hers.

When the sensation burst, she attempted to smother her low scream, but it released through clenched lips.

After clenching along the shadow, he flipped her on her back. She still wasn’t in control of any of her movements, limp for him to manoeuvre her as he saw fit.

He tenderly brushed her sweaty curls to the side. “I wish you’d let me kiss you tonight.”

Unable to think coherently, she briefly let go of her end of the spell. She thought Titus would bring himself to finish, since he wasn’t receiving pleasure from her anymore, but he lifted her legs, directing them to wrap them around his hips as his shadows slowly entered her again.

“You’re sated.” He gave a sly grin. “But I’m far from done.”

---

“I’m not sure my body can handle much more,” she panted after the third orgasm.

“You will if I want you to.”

He fucked her slower in between the buildup, almost tenderly, pushing and pulling, until her thoughts stimulated her shadows again. He never complained when her spell on him went lax, waiting patiently and using his own to torture her until she participated again. He twisted her on whims, folding her legs and arms when and where he wanted, a performance of his endurance in every position.

At the moment, he rested on his knees, holding her close to him in a hug, her arms around his shoulders for support as his shadow rhythmically rocked him into her.

“Then *make* me finish,” he dared. He’d taunted it before, but she’d been too mindless to understand.

He had more stamina than she expected, resisting all her methods. Perhaps the spell was more intertwined with her body than she thought. In an experiment, she clenched the inner walls of her pussy tighter on the shadow as if to squeeze his cock.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “Just like that.” With a hard thrust forward and a low groan, he came. She felt the damp of his release through the thin material of his trunks. In the aftermath, he held her tighter to him, head buried in the crook of her neck. Sweat dripped off both of them. “You were perfect. Everything was perfect. Everything *will be* perfect, just like tonight. I promise.”

Hermione didn’t speak, too exhausted as he picked her up, carrying her bridal style to his bed. As she entered, she risked casting a nonverbal spell at the bottom of the door.

Before sleep, he cleaned himself and then her with a spell, transforming both their outfits into comfortable night clothes before collapsing.

When the lights went out, he stared at the ceiling, tugging her into his hold, forcing her head on his chest. “Do you think you could ever forgive me completely?”

It was a vulnerable question.

Sometimes she was shocked that his heart sounded just like anyone else’s. Human, able to be broken and repaired. For all that he’d done, she didn’t think he deserved anything from her. “Maybe.”

He didn’t press for more. She kept her eyes open, resisting being tired. Her hate strengthened her resolve until his breathing slowed, eyes flickering under lids with dreams.

She hoped he had nightmares.

Hermione extracted herself carefully, grateful he’d been too distracted in his sated exhaustion to notice she’d conjured a doorstop, preventing it from closing completely.

More importantly, he’d made the dire mistake of leaving her wrists unshackled. Her hands felt light, the magic a threat buzzing close to her skin, singing to be used. To be wielded as a weapon.

A thought entered her mind, urging her to tug off the rest of her restraints right then, fleeing into the night. But she discarded it, knowing Titus would wake the second she pressed his fingers to the necklace.

Her plans needed to stay the course.

Before exiting the room, she stared at her old guardian, testing the weight of his deeds, knowing the scale of good and evil remained the same.

“I will never forgive you,” she whispered, allowing her soul to harden.

Hermione travelled along the corridors, entering his study.



She walked around to his side of the desk. Placing a finger to her face, she trailed along the nape of her neck, extracting a droplet of blood he'd spit on her with his shadow spell. Something he'd missed with his rushed cleaning charm. She used a gentle aguamenti, just barely wetting the crimson, returning it to its original liquid state.

Though she'd planned to get the blood in other ways, this worked into her plans even better.

She stared at the tiny droplet and whispered a replicating charm. She watched as the blood divided and expanded until it covered her palm.

Hermione pressed her bloodied palm to the drawer, careful not to let her flesh graze it.

It opened, sliding out with a satisfying swish.

Hermione worked fast and efficiently. In her short search, she found her father's parchments, Finch and Dean's wands, the poison Lavender had given her, the skin-bound book, extra polyjuice, and just like Draco suspected— the slime.

Leaving the rest of the objects in place to retrieve at another time, Hermione pulled out three empty vials, placing the correct amount of polyjuice, slime, and poison in each.

She only needed a little. Not enough for Titus to notice anything missing.

All magic had loopholes. And as she theorized, the loophole for blood wards was simply... the caster's blood.

Hermione closed the drawer and erased every trace of her blood with a thorough cleaning charm, already thinking about where to hide the vials for the night.

*Step six: obtain the final potion ingredients.*

---

CarrieMaxwell created a spotify playlist of all my song suggestions! [here](#)

Frau Blucher gifted me another art piece! It features Draco and his red eyes in Chapter 47, the Price of Love: [Here](#)

House Pet is on Spotify as a podfic! By Read it and Weep [Here](#)

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: dubious consent.

There will be an alternate dead dove one shot of this chapter where Titus gets exactly what he wants, though it will reach the same conclusion. I plan for it to be interchangeable for people who like it. I'll link it to the end of this chapter when I finish, which should be soon!

# Chapter 54: Femme Fatale

## Chapter Notes

### Song Suggestions:

Adam Jensen- "I'm a Sucker for a Liar in a Red Dress"

IC3PEAK- "Плак-Плак (Boo-Hoo)" ... this song was recommended in my comment section. I've searched to give recognition, but I can't find it. So if you were the one who suggested this PERFECT song, thank you!

Not an official song suggestion, but I listened to "Light of the Seven" from the Game of Thrones soundtrack to write this, so it plays well with it.

Also, please know that I do listen to all the songs people recommend. Even if I don't use them for this story, sometimes they inspire other stories or chapters!

Thank you to my lovely beta, MyPrivateInsanity, and my amazing alpha group. This story is 100% better with their help!

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

### Previously on House Pet:

Hermione did everything in her power to get out of the dungeon while keeping her worst secrets close.

Several days after her release, Draco and Harry snuck through the ward hole but found her already out. They used their limited time to figure out how to acquire the missing potion ingredients and to solidify their plans for escape.

But Titus had plans to arrest Draco at the last moment, which would have upended everything. Hermione made a deal using her knowledge of Titus' desires. Invoking the shadow spell, she gave Titus a taste of fake intimacy to keep him home.

Once asleep, Hermione entered his study, stealing what she needed in preparation for the Beltane celebration the next morning.

## Femme Fatale

Hermione woke in an empty bed with the obsidian shackles once again caging her magic. She blinked at the ceiling, trying to orient herself to the serious nature of the day. By midnight, the course of her life would change for better or worse, and there was only so much she could predict.

Pretending to be restless, she spent her morning wandering the hedge mazes. Titus ordered Bitty to follow her until the muggleborn luncheon, citing a continued lack of trust.

To be fair, he *shouldn't* trust her, especially after all the subterfuge she revealed, but that wasn't the point. Bitty impeded many of her plans.

Hermione allowed an hour to pass before meandering to her true destination with Bitty hopping happily along behind her. She bent down to smell some wildflowers near the Griffin Statue, carefully slipping the vial of Polyjuice near the base for Draco to pick up later, its existence obscured by overgrown foliage.

With her first task finished, she travelled among the shifting hedges, stopping in front of the badger statue.

"Bitty, could you please fetch me some water and a snack? I'm famished."

The elf's large ears wiggled, seeming distressed at her request. "Master told Bitty she shouldn't let Mistress Hermione walk around without her."

Hermione thought through the loopholes of the statement. "But I'm *so* thirsty and hungry. And it's such a pretty morning. I'm sure Titus wouldn't mind me eating in the garden. I promise not to take a single step while you fetch breakfast."

That provided a way for the elf to honor both requests.

"Stay right there, Mistress Hermione, or Bitty will iron her fingers for disobeying Master's order." On that disturbing note, Bitty popped away.

As Hermione promised, she didn't take a single step. Pushing back the tangle of vines at the base of the statue, she crouched and picked up the tiny cauldron she'd hidden there. It expanded on contact, exposing the bubbling brew inside, now gelatinous and dark as tar.

Extracting the vials of venom and slime from her pocket, she carefully added the correct number of drops of each ingredient. The potion hissed, bubbling and writhing as if alive for thirty seconds before settling into a crystal-clear liquid resembling water.

The perfect colour and consistency.

Hermione sighed in relief, slightly in disbelief she'd managed to create the potion under Titus' nose.

Yet she remained wary. Titus had found the bag and the spying earpiece. Perhaps, he'd also discovered this too, leaving it in place to see what she'd do with it. Contemplating that

outcome, and how to respond to it, Hermione shrank the cauldron and tucked the potion back into her pocket, making a quick search along the perimeter of the statue.

Earlier that morning, Draco had snuck onto the grounds in the hazy grey of dusk with disillusioned limbs and Harry's cloak, leaving the object she'd requested.

There, right beside another crop of wildflowers, a glint of silver caught her attention. An ornate single prong hair pin shone in the sun, inlaid with ruby robins, resembling a hair ornament owned by Titus' mother.

Hermione snatched it up, and it contracted to the size of a sewing needle, possessing the same shrinking charms as other items that Draco had sent her, except this one responded by intention instead of contact. She placed it next to the vials and cauldron in her pocket, unsure if she felt prepared or overwhelmed for what she needed to do.

---

Hermione slipped on a stark white linen dress and belted a blue sash around her middle. It shaped her nicely, skirt billowing around her legs like a cloud.

She pulled her hair halfway back with a matching blue bow. For makeup, she swiped on a lipstick slightly darker than her normal shade, some mascara, and a tiny amount of rouge.

Once finished, she resembled the picture of innocence. Titus' coddled little muggleborn. Harmless and settled.

As if her thoughts lured him toward her, Titus knocked once before opening the door to her old room. He leaned against the doorframe, examining her with a soft smile where she stood, sliding a hand under his vest over his heart. "Very pretty."

Hermione straightened her clothes as she viewed him in the vanity mirror, pretending to blush by dipping her head.

He walked toward her, placing callused fingers along her neck. "No matter how pretty you are, you're not fooling me. Not after everything you revealed last night."

She twisted to glare at him properly. "I'm not planning anything. We made a deal."

He captured her chin, forcing her to keep eye contact. "Forgive me if I don't believe you. I don't think it's in your nature to be anything but challenging and infuriating when it comes to obeying my requests. I anticipate the same behavior tonight." He grinned. "Although this time, I'm looking forward to it."

Her stomach twisted, remembering everything vividly, her body still tense from the sensations, a mixture of pleasure and hatred.

"I'm not excited for lunch," she admitted, redirecting the conversation before it devolved.

He brushed his thumb along her cheekbone, pulling away. "Forcing yourself to be social will be good for you. Lovegood is a fine friend for now, but you need more than someone who

believes there are imaginary creature infestations everywhere. By this point, your isolation is self-inflicted. Zala and Katie—”

“Not today.” Hermione closed her eyes, wishing he’d give up on his quest to reunite her with Katie. Knowing him, he probably already had a few schemes cooked up to force proximity, despite her resistance.

“I’ll let it rest for now, but I want you to consider making amends. I only press the issue because I want you to be happy.”

No, he wanted her to be complacent and forgiving, absolving him of guilt. He’d sacrifice her happiness each time for his version of contentment.

As before, Hermione would let Titus believe he’d get everything he wanted.

---

Titus led her to the rarely used southern sunroom, which he’d lengthened to accommodate most of the guests. Spring sunshine filtered through windows stretching across the entire room, even taking up most of the ceiling, soldered with patterns of native flowers. Roses spilled into the room along twisting vines. Lemon trees grew in the corners, imported from the Amalfi Coast decades before. Cast-iron tables with elaborate designs dotted most of the space, decorated with crystal goblets, golden cutlery, and the finest china.

“It looks like a dream,” Hermione admired the room, her heels clicking against the mosaic tile as she inspected the roses.

Titus seemed pleased at her approval. “I’ll leave you here with Bitty until the guests arrive. I’d wait with you, but I have tasks to complete before tonight.” He strode toward her, brushing a kiss on her cheek. “You’ll do just fine. Don’t be nervous.”

---

The muggleborns arrived shortly after noon in their bright dresses, looking around in awe as magical apparitions of birds and butterflies floated around the room. Though many of them were accustomed to wealth, Nott Manor was grander than other pureblood homes, impressive and ancient even to high figures in the government. Only the Malfoys could rival it.

Titus expected her to entertain like a Lady of the Manor. Like his mother would, hosting a high tea.

But Hermione found it difficult.

When Katie arrived, they both froze. Marcus whispered something in her ear, but Katie barely acknowledged him as he walked out, leaving them to stare at each other.

She should be a good host, smile and say hello, but she just stared dumbly.

“Welcome,” Hermione finally managed to get out. Which felt ridiculous to say to someone who had spent most of her childhood within the same walls. Together they’d explored every

inch of the manor, including the southern sunroom. "Eddy made quiche." Hermione motioned to a table. "I know it's your favorite."

"That's lovely. It's good to be back." Katie blinked quickly, about to cry. Hermione didn't know how to extract herself from the awkward interaction.

Giving a hesitant smile, Katie made the first move, leaving to get a cup of tea.

Hermione remained polite, greeting each muggleborn with typical pleasantries. She tried not to let her horror shine through when a heavily pregnant Abigail entered with Yaxley, showing she'd already transferred to his home, per agreement with Titus.

Did they already take her child? They must have, given the woman's wan expression. The thought made her so nauseous she could only nod, though Abigail ignored her anyway, in her own world, reminding her of Julie.

When Carmen stomped inside with an antagonistic scowl, a thrill zipped inside Hermione—the same sensation that always appeared right before doing something ill-advised.

She waited until the room settled, and her initial hosting duties were complete, to grab a plate with a scone and some grapes.

Carmen frowned when she approached, throwing Hermione a sharp glance as she took the empty seat beside her. "You look disgustingly chipper."

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip, grasping her plate hard. "Perhaps I know something you don't."

Carmen glared harder, tapping her fingers on her skirt. "What do you mean?"

Hermione took a bite to disguise her whisper. "An escape plan."

"If it's legitimate, unless you're a complete idiot, you shouldn't be talking about it so openly."

Hermione took a risk by extending an invitation. "I want you to come with me."

The silence between them tightened and lengthened. "Don't lie to me," she hissed between clenched teeth. "Saying things like that could do something dangerous like... give me hope."

"It's not a trick," Hermione reassured, taking another bite of her scone. "Why would I lie?"

"How sound is the plan?"

"There are plans, and there are backup plans, and I have reliable outside help. How sound the plans are is still up for debate. I'm not going to lie, you'd be taking a leap of faith, but it also might be the only chance out of here."

She let Carmen mull it over for as long as she needed. "What do I need to know?"

"How well are you watched by your master?"

“He’s so old he’s nearly dead. I think he forgets who I am sometimes.”

An obvious exaggeration, but she got the point.

“Perfect.” Hermione picked up the napkin. Under it, she’d hidden the tiny cauldron with the remaining potion she’d just slipped out of her pocket, transferring it into Carmen’s lap, who responded quickly, curling her fingers around the napkin, hiding it from view. “Later tonight, when the time is right, I’ll need you to give that back to me. That’s all you need to know right now.”

To prevent Titus from finding the potion on her, offloading it provided the best solution.

Carmen proved smart enough not to pick further into her reasoning. It must be difficult for someone like her to trust anyone else, so Hermione felt relieved when she whispered a small, "Okay."

"Is there anyone else you think I can warn? Someone you trust?" Hermione asked. They both glanced around the room, recognizing the futility. Like Katie, some muggleborns were loyal to their masters, others might crack under the pressure, and the rest she didn’t know well enough.

"Unfortunately, most of them would probably choose to stay in a situation they know as long as they can endure it." Carmen shook her head and reached into her pocket, pulling out the flask of whisky she'd secreted into the last luncheon and took a sip.

“And you?”

“I’d rather die than stay, and I don’t care where I go.” Carmen handed Hermione the whisky. “That means if this goes sideways, and I’m trapped again, *you* ’ll be the one to kill me. Some way, somehow, you’ll put me out of my misery forever. Promise me or I won’t help you at all.”

Hermione hesitated, unsure if she could fulfill such a grisly vow. She drank a big gulp of the whisky, letting it burn her throat.

“I promise.”

---

For the second time that day, Hermione stared at herself in the vanity mirror, hair pulled elegantly back with a ruby encrusted hair pin.

Titus had ordered her Beltane dress long ago, made with a semi-translucent red organza crafted of acromantula silk threads. When she moved, the ethereal layers provided a playful illusion of bare skin underneath, just a tease of hidden curves.

Delicate gossamer fairy wings spread out on her back, created with a shimmer charm. Instead of the magical creature masks everyone wore for Beltane, small rubies dotted along her skin, shaped around her eyes in a pretty pattern. The rest of her exposed skin gleamed with a subtle sheen of iridescent golden powder.



Hermione kept her permanent collar visible, the black ribbon slashing around her neck, the crystal dangling at her throat. The bracelet and the shackles on her wrists remained disillusioned as usual, though she felt the constant weight of them. After making sure everything was in place, twisting and turning the bracelet to satisfaction, she allowed the negative emotions she'd suppressed to swallow her— fear, hate, despair— and then she released them into the void of her attempted occlumency as she finally left the cocoon of her room.

---

Titus waited for her at the bottom of the staircase. Adhering to pureblood tradition, as the Lord of the Manor hosting Beltane, he'd transformed into a mythical Fae king, dressed in black from head to toe. He looked as if he'd stepped through time, with heavy silver chains around his neck festooned with the Nott crest and a thick cloak edged with Puffskein fur, both probably pulled from the coffers of his ancestors. A set of stag antlers adorned his head with a gold crown encircling his brow, a simple black mask covering the top half of his face.

Hearing her heels click down the stairs, he glanced up, his gaze focusing on her as she descended. He grabbed her hand, giving a teasing bow and a kiss on her knuckles. "My very own lovely Fairy Sprite."

Titus spared no expense turning her into a magical creature tonight, captured in the wild to be put on display.

A high-priced, rare animal to dangle on a leash.

---

When the party began, Hermione stood beside Titus in the front sitting room, greeting the guests as they arrived by floo. The crème de la crème of society entered one after the other in their Beltane costumes, each a different magical creature. Sprinkled among them were dignitaries and ambassadors from other countries, even an envoy from antagonistic Bulgaria, whom Titus went out of his way to make comfortable.

For an hour, Hermione remained perfectly silent by his side, not expected to interact beyond the occasional nod or smile. It allowed her to watch the people with a critical eye, sizing up everyone that arrived. How easy it might be to outmaneuver them. Who might be a potential threat.

Toward the end, she tried to control her nerves, fidgeting with the gauzy fabric of her dress. They were alone now, and he grasped her hand to still it. "What would you do if I told you that I needed to have a chat with Thorfinn before the dinner?"

"I'd find a way to spy on you."

He grinned, as if pleased she remained predictable. "Your curiosity has always been impossible to repress. Very well then, come along. It's just to get an update for work. Probably very boring information."

He framed allowing her to overhear his discussions as an indulgent act, but he just didn't want her out of his sight tonight.

"And if it ends up being exciting information?"

"What would it matter? After your vow, you'll have to keep my secrets."

Hermione waited until he turned to stab a dark scowl into his back.

---

Thorfinn waited for them away from the crowds at the entrance to the study, seeming uneasy even from a distance.

Titus's brow furrowed as they neared, glancing back at Hermione once, as if debating whether to let her listen. Despite what he'd said earlier, he'd rather keep her ignorant. "What's wrong?"

"It's the dementors at Azkaban. They're... missing."

Titus curled his hands into fists. "What do you mean *missing*?"

Boring, indeed. Hermione tried not to react. Nothing about Azkaban had ever been in her plans. Could Draco have done it? It made her ill and angry to think about. His soul was already damaged. How much more could he endure?

"We're not sure yet. They just floated away, as if called. The guards think it's a bad omen."

"And what do *you* think is happening?"

Thorfinn shifted on his feet. "I think they've been lured by someone and not for a good purpose."

"That would require a level of dark magic—" Titus stilled, taking a moment to think of what to do. "Bring half the force to investigate. It could be nothing, but it could be serious, and we need to remain vigilant. Marco's unit can go as well for backup. Guard Azkaban and the ministry first."

"I thought you wanted the best aurors here tonight?"

Hermione had seen them prowling around. She'd anticipated Titus would station security at every entrance, so she'd attempted to study their movements in a strategic way, hoping she could work around them without a fight.

Titus only shook his head. "While the extra aurors make guests feel comfortable, I don't really need them. The wards are old and strong. Out of an abundance of caution, I'll turn off the floo for a few hours. Keep four or five aurors here and take the rest."

"Will you need me to update you?"

"Absolutely not. Tonight is important to me. If anyone fucking interrupts me with anything short of the end of the world, I'll publicly torture them."

Thorfinn had the bravery to give a mocking salute with only two fingers. “Zero interruptions, sir.”

"Good man." Titus reached out and touched his shoulder. "If you need anything, Walter Filibus should be at the ministry tonight, along with Dolohov. You know he hates events like these. And while I'm grateful you worked tonight, don't show up tomorrow. You're supposed to still be on leave."

Thorfinn gave a guarded nod to Hermione before walking toward the front sitting room to leave.

Titus turned his sharp gaze to her. “You should know that Malfoy’s trapped inside his property by his father’s orders—exits are being watched, the house is surrounded by anti-apparition and caterwauling charms, and floo access is disabled. If anyone lured the dementors, it wasn’t him. Don’t let this give you any ideas. No one is coming between us tonight, and if they try, I’ll show them that I’ve lost patience with the theatrics.”

It was too bad for Titus that she'd already anticipated that too.

---

The Nott ballroom was famed for its beauty: gilded walls, crystal chandeliers, and mirrors that rivalled Versailles. She used to sneak into the room as a child and pretend to dance in the old styles, dreaming of one day attending a real ball like in the stories she’d read. It didn’t even need enhancements for the night like the southern sunroom did. Everything glittered and gleamed, even the people, all dressed as different magical creatures.

A phoenix strode by their table, red feathers fluttering behind them. Several unicorns wove throughout the crowds. A manitcore boomed with laughter next to a bowtruckle. In the corner, Gregory Goyle, dressed as an Erumpent, sat next to Luna, who swayed to the music with her eyes closed and her arms waving, bedazzled with pink and white stripes, transformed into an animal which probably only existed in her mind.

On the stage, a troupe of musicians and singers played classical songs. And like he’d asked of Yaxley, several whores from the club, dressed as elegantly as the guests, mingled in the crowd to escort the single men for the night.

She didn’t see Angel among their numbers, though she doubted Titus would dare to upset her with any negative memories tonight. It relieved her, as she never quite knew the woman’s motivations— which meant she couldn’t be trusted not to get in the way. Especially since Angel desired to keep her in place.

Hermione relaxed in Titus’ lap, head against his chest, her wings charmed to fold down comfortably. He kept one heavy hand on her knee while deep in conversation with a Wizengamot member. With his other, he alternated between feeding decadent hors d’oeuvres to himself and to her.

Blaise and Nera weren’t invited to the manor, making it easier to stomach the inane conversations without incident. Several of the most important visiting ambassadors, along with Ginny and Rosier, sat near them. Overly pleasant chatter filtered around her, but she

ignored it all, intent on going over her plan in her mind, trying to figure out how Titus— or anyone else— could stop her.

The Beltane celebration would last until midnight, at which time Titus planned for them to perform the old rituals in a private section of the garden. But by then, most of the guests would have filtered out, limiting her success. She needed to lure him to a secluded area soon if they wanted their plan to work.

And she knew just the puppet strings to pull.

“Eddy really outdid himself,” Hermione whispered to Titus during a lull, unable to stop herself from sucking a little honey left on her finger. She pretended to drink another long sip of wine from a golden goblet.

“That’s enough for tonight.” Titus plucked the wine out of her hand, setting it to the side.

“Why aren’t you drinking?” He usually sipped whisky at dinners.

“You can take the edge off your nerves, if you desire, but I want to be completely sober.”

The hair along her arm raised at the thought.

“Always so serious. I thought this was a party?” Pretending to be slightly sloshed might help her. She leaned over and licked his chin, the stubble rough under her tongue. “You missed some honey.”

He startled and straightened. “How much did you drink?”

“Enough to take the *edge* off, I suppose.”

His hand tightened on her knee, though he almost grinned. “Behave in public.”

“And if I have the urge to *misbehave*?” She leaned closer and slid her tongue up his neck again, and as if by instinct, Titus’ hand slipped higher on her thigh.

He took one long, heavy breath and dipped his head down, voice rough in her ear. “Careful how you tease me tonight.”

“But I’m bored. What else is there to do besides tease you?”

“Do you need my attention?”

“Yes, sir.” She gave a fake salute with two fingers, mocking Thorfinn.

He cursed under his breath and glanced to the ceiling as if to gain strength. “What are you planning? You’ve dreaded Beltane for weeks, and now suddenly you want me to believe you’re looking forward to it?”

Last night proved to her that more than her consent, he desired her enthusiasm. He wanted her the same way she gave herself to Draco. Chasing and teasing. Games and light-hearted

play. For all his serious nature, he wanted to have fun.

Since he planned to force her into this role, she planned to exploit it as she pleased.

“Besides the wine that is making me feel overly... warm, I’m still conflicted tonight, of course, because a large part of me is still angry at you, but—” She played with the heavy Nott crest dangling on the thick silver chain before drawing patterns along his stomach, muscles tightening under her touch. “I admit I haven’t been able to stop thinking about last night.”

He studied her in silence for a moment. “I haven’t either.”

“Do you want to know a secret?”

“Will it make me angry?”

“The opposite.”

“Then yes.”

She let her lips linger in a soft kiss against his throat, and he swallowed, exposing how much it affected him as she whispered against his skin. “I touched myself before dinner, attempting to get it off my mind.” She forced his hand up her thigh, so close that all he’d need to do is press his fingers down. “But I still ache terribly.”

He gave a groan, only audible to her. “In the future, if you tease me so cruelly like this, we won’t even make it outside. I’ll fuck you right here.”

“In front of everyone?” The proposition shocked her.

“No one would even know I was deep inside you.” Grabbing a fistful of her voluminous skirt, he showed just how easy it would be to slip under her dress undetected. He clutched her tighter to him, whispering in her ear. “I wonder how well you could keep a straight face while coming.”

Despite the depravity he painted, a tingle branched across her skin. Soon after, disgust sent a similar sensation, almost indistinguishable. Always with him, they intertwined.

Titus drummed the fingers of his free hand on the table in a restless way. “We can’t leave until we’ve had our first dance.”

“Then let’s dance.”

---

While twirling to the beat of the music, Hermione allowed herself to be transported to a different world, a space free of worry.

She could say many negative things about Titus, but he was undeniably a lovely dancer, moving his feet with the precision of an expert dueler, guiding her along so smoothly she didn’t have to think about where to step next.

They'd begun their dance alone in the center of the ballroom, the lights dimming to spotlight them. The hosting couple always went first, and then others joined in, until a crowd rotated around them.

They danced for four songs, until pink blossomed on both their cheeks from exertion. After twirling her, he tugged her back into his arms to a stop. Magical creatures spun around them, but he only had eyes for her.

He gave a gentle kiss to her forehead, both her cheeks, and the tip of her nose, voice rough with growing need. "You can misbehave as much as you want now."

"And what if I want you to chase me?" She knew he'd been dreaming of playing chase since seeing her memories of Draco.

"Then you should start running."

"Where do you want me to go?"

"In the southern hedge maze... the old section."

She didn't need to be told twice. Nerves rushed down her arms into her stomach, making her head fuzzy, knowing everything inched closer to the more dangerous parts of the plan.

"Catch me if you can," she teased and then tugged out of his arms. Pulling up the fabric of her skirt, she took off, dodging around couples as fast as she could, though her heels hindered her.

Titus hunted her without urgency, eyes tilted down with a predatory gleam.

Down the familiar corridors she went, avoiding lingering guests, until she arrived at an area of the manor no one besides aurors dared to traverse. She ignored the gossiping portraits, hurtling through an exit toward the back of the manor.

The moon shone bright and clear, bloated and full in the midnight sky. Magic zipped in the air, heavier than usual due to the thinning veil at Beltane. A gentle chill brushed along her skin. Just enough to rejuvenate her energy.

Hermione knew the route by heart, sprinting as fast as she could, kicking off her heels when they made her stumble. A cushioning charm protected her feet as she ran, and she twisted to find Titus not far behind her, wand out.

She squealed dramatically and darted into one of the many entrances to the hedge maze. Having spent enough time in the labyrinth as a child, she knew not to let the shifting hedges confuse her, instead using the permanent statues as her guide.

Halfway through, the hedges started to shift in patterns she did not recognize, as if herding her somewhere. She didn't fight the course, allowing the ever-changing maze to guide her to its master.

Stumbling out into a familiar clearing, she yelped in surprise when Titus stepped around the manticore statue, gathering her up in a sudden hold, slinging her over his broad shoulders, holding the back of her thighs securely to his chest.

“Now that I’ve caught you, what shall I do with you?” He began walking, just as assuredly as before.

“Whatever you want, I think. Isn’t that the right of victors?”

He gave a low hum in agreement.

They didn’t wander long. Just around a few bends, he gently set her down in a clearing much larger than the last.

“I’ve never seen this before,” Hermione said in shock. Discovering something new on the property never happened.

In front of her was a circle of marble thrones, glowing pale white in the moonlight, as if eternally waiting for the knights of Camelot to arrive, carved with different scenes of battles and long-ago stories. Violets and Queen of the Nights encircled the thrones, dotted with different types of volcanic glass, helping to cage the magic produced during rituals, similar to the Malfoy alcove in the Forbidden Forest.

In the center was a jar of salt, a goblet of wine, and a bowl filled with blue woad paint intended for runes.

“You wouldn’t have seen it,” he explained. “It’s only visible for Beltane. My ancestors have used this ritual circle for centuries. We have another just for Samhain that I can show you later in the year.”

Pure power thrummed in the air, like a current in the ocean, so thick that if she stuck out her tongue, she thought she might be able to drink it down, zinging even though the obsidian.

Titus strode to the largest and most elaborate throne, collapsing on it in a relaxed pose, legs spread, arms draping along the curved armrests. The golden crown on his head tilted to the side as he stared at her, blue eyes peeking out of his mask, antlers towering to the sky.

From her point of view, he did resemble a Fae king— a capricious one, capable of cruelty.

The air seemed cooler than before, the organza fabric of her dress doing little to protect her from the elements while her bare feet dug into the rich soil below.

“What do we do first?” she asked.

“We’ll start with you bringing me the goblet of wine.”

She did as he asked, the wine as red as blood. When she got close enough to him, he tugged her into his lap, arranging her so that she straddled him, knees resting on either side of his legs, her voluminous skirt billowing around them. He kept one arm wrapped around her back to steady her.

“You’re quieter than before,” he said, carefully studying her. “More serious. Do you suddenly have cold feet?”

“Physically and metaphorically,” she admitted.

He noticed the goosebumps on her arm and her shiver. With a flick of his wand, he cast a warming charm along the perimeter of the ritual circle.

“Better?”

“The physical part. I’m still working on the metaphor.”

“You always do better when I limit the surprises. Would it help for me to list the steps of the night?”

“I think so.”

He tapped the goblet she still clutched. “First, we’ll drink the wine, which contains a watered-down calming drought. How much or little you drink is up to you. I intend to only take a sip. No matter what, it’s not enough to mess with your capability to make decisions. You’ll still possess all your reasoning and awareness. It will just help you to stop overthinking everything.”

He waited for her reaction. Though she doubted he laced it with a memory potion or an aphrodisiac, it reminded her too much of the wine offered to her after the Trials to feel comfortable.

“What happens next?” she prompted after digesting what he’d told her.

“We’ll give our vows, although not an unbreakable one like you offered. The one we’ll perform is less serious and doesn’t need a third to oversee, but it’s just as permanent. I found it in the Nott Grimoire. Breaking this vow wouldn’t kill you, but it would inform me of what you did.”

Of course. Titus wouldn’t give her an option for death. He planned to trap her forever, not provide a last-resort way out.

“And the marriage vows?” she asked.

“Those will happen after, and they’ll be private between us. We’ll first perform Beltane in the way my ancestors did, painting each other with runes, which will bless our future, and then we’ll consummate. The magic of Beltane tends to be its own potent aphrodisiac.”

She’d need to be careful. Despite her plans, one of the purposes of Beltane was for fertility. If she ended up coerced into the vows, the magic created tonight might break through any contraceptives or binding spells, if powerful enough.

Noticing her reluctance, he tried to soothe her. “We’ll go at your pace tonight. As slow or fast as you need.”



He wanted her to initiate. She calmed herself as she raised the goblet for him to drink. “I’d rather you start.”

“It’s customary for the woman to take the first sip.”

Was it? She didn’t know much about the older customs of Beltane.

There was something in his tone and the way he examined her that made her pause. Did he plan to drug her like she feared? No, that wouldn’t make sense. Titus wanted her to participate. His pride wouldn’t allow anything else. Not to mention, it might mess with the magic for the vows if she couldn’t consent.

Hermione remained on edge, sensing something off when she took a tentative sip.

She waited, but nothing happened.

Titus relaxed, grabbed the goblet, and downed his own gulp, which made her relieved in turn, eliminating the threat of spiked wine.

She twisted the leather bracelet on her wrist, a common nervous fidget of hers, causing a small sliver to fall into her left hand.

“You’re trembling still,” he said.

Her internal clock ticked.

“I’m just nervous.” Gently, she kissed him. He tasted of sweet wine. Smelled like cinnamon. As he promised, he didn’t push for anything more than she gave.

His fingers tangled into the strings threaded along the back of her dress, tugging at the bow, unravelling it.

She pulled back, hands digging into her hair.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Getting comfortable.”

He didn’t respond, merely relaxed against the marble throne, watching as she slipped the hair pin out of her hair.

He grabbed her wrist before she could place it in her lap, examining the accessory. “This was my mother’s.”

She clenched her left hand around the sliver. “I didn’t steal it if that’s what you’re implying. Bitty brought it to me when I asked. I thought you approved the request—”

“Of course you can use it. Everything in the manor belongs to you too. I was just admiring it.” He handed her back the pin, eyes narrowed as if thinking through something. “What do you need from me tonight?”

“I just want to stop thinking.” Hermione leaned down, letting her lips linger next to his, staring into his soul. “I just want to feel. Can you help me do that?”

“I can.” His grip tightened on her waist, one hand reaching up to loosen the laces on her back. “All you need to do is trust me like you did last night.”

The clock ticked and ticked. And then it ran out of time.

She pretended to finally submit to his will. When he kissed her again, this time deeper, the taste of him in her mouth, she gave her own moan, creating a distraction.

Hermione raised her hand, the sharp tip of his mother's hair pin pressed near his carotid artery.

Titus snatched her wrist before she could pierce skin, twisting it around and down into a painful position, shoving her to sit back. With the force, she let go of the hair pin, and it fell into his lap.

“Trying to stab me?” He grimaced, picking up the silver accessory with his free hand again to hold between them, his other hand still gripping her wrist in an almost painful position. “I must say that it doesn’t look sharp enough to do any damage, and it doesn’t have a magical signature. I know this because I paid a goblin to search your room and the gardens this morning for magical objects Malfoy might have sent. However, I wouldn’t put anything past you.”

Did he discover the polyjuice she’d left for Draco? No, goblins specialized in objects, not potions. The thought didn’t bring her comfort at the moment.

“I wasn’t doing anything. It was just in my hand—”

“Liar.” He gave a harsh laugh. “I’d expected you to use the potion in some way, but this still surprised me.”

She froze, showing her shock. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, and you’re hurting my wrist.”

“Oh, but you do.” He raised an eyebrow without relenting his hold. “I found the cauldron you hid in the garden around the same time I found the bag.”

Her chest constricted with fear. Like she suspected, he’d only left it to see what she’d do with it. Most likely, he’d rather trap her at the last moment, giving her no space to come up with a new plan.

“But you—” she trailed off, exposing her adrenaline, breathing hard while he slowly grinned. “You knew this whole time.”

“I thought you’d try to slip the potion into the wine, but when you drank it, I knew you’d thought up something else. Tell me— is the tip dipped in the potion? I feel it’s only right to inform you that such a small amount wouldn’t have been able to harm me anyway, no matter the ingredients.”

She tried to tug free on the vice grip on her wrist, but it proved futile. “Let go.”

“Not yet.” He didn’t seem as amused as before. “It will be better for you in the long run if you give me the truth now.”

“Don’t be angry. I was just scared of Beltane. Please—” She choked on a sob, thinking of all her plans crumbling. “Don’t lock me in the dungeon.”

“I should do exactly that!” His lips twisted in a snarl, and then the hold on her wrist loosened. “You’re dishonorable enough to try and escape a deal, but I sense there’s much more to this plot. Tomorrow you’re going to tell me the name of the potion and everything you planned down to the last detail.” He flung the hair pin out of bounds of the Beltane ritual circle, clattering against pebbles. The grip on her right wrist relaxed, showing he believed he’d eliminated the threat. “But unlike you, I refuse to ruin tonight. Once more, I’ll be forgiving of your antics, and I’d appreciate if you showed me that you’re finally grateful for the undeserved pardon. The ritual will proceed as usual.” He closed his eyes and then opened them, his expression much softer. “This is your home, Sprite. With me. As it always has been. It’s far past time—”

Hermione elongated the sharp sliver in her left hand, transforming it into the replicate hair pin she’d collected in the gardens, and slammed it into his stomach before he could stop her, pressing the tip to inject the potion.

Titus let go of her with a pained grunt, and she scrambled out of his hold. She fell to the pebbled ground and then jumped to her feet, ready to bolt.

“Bloody fuck. Did you just—” Titus glanced down at the hair pin protruding from his stomach, made much sharper than the family relic he’d thrown. Much like the first time she stabbed him, his surprise sloughed away into anger. Grabbing his wand, he tried to stand. “You *treacherous* little—”

Roots exploded from the ground, twisting up the marble into vines and branches, forcing him to sit again. Within seconds, they wrapped around his legs, up his torso and arms, encircling his entire body, the thorns on the vines piercing his skin, entombing him in the Beltane throne.

His body went limp, eyes wide with shock.

Hermione stared at the foliage in awe.

*Bark of a Blood Ward’s Tree.* It was why she chose the Draught of Plegia. If someone attacked a Nott heir on the grounds with magic, the wards would normally retaliate, but using a piece of the tree from the property, drenched in blood magic, confused the ancient protection. Only the head was spared from the potion to prevent permanent damage to the brain or accidental death, allowing a person their conscious thoughts and ability to speak while remaining helpless.

“Undo this *right now*,” his voice was low, antlers tilting.

She wished to use a silencio to make him shut up but decided not to risk any unnecessary spells. With the party going full swing, subdued with noise-dampening charms, along with the ritual circle's protections, and the size of the property grounds, she doubted anyone would hear him if he screamed for help. Elf magic faltered inside ritual circles, leaving him unable to call for them either.

At the moment, he was at her mercy.

Wary of how well the potion would hold, she touched his fingers, each wrapped with its individual vine at the knuckle.

No response.

"Don't you fucking dare," he warned, understanding what she intended to do.

Hermione knelt with her face near a precarious thorn, forcing his pliable fingers to curl around the back of the universe necklace, unclasping it. It clattered against the stones below, and Hermione let out a shaky groan, clutching her bare neck.

She'd been a sleight of hand away from permanent slavery. The aftershocks of adrenaline rattled her, and she leaned over and vomited whatever wine she'd drunk earlier.

"You won't be able to track me now." Wiping her lips, she glanced up at Titus.

She'd been very literal with the application of what Titus and Draco had taught her. A simple red herring. A decoy. A subtle trick, letting him believe he'd found the potion and discovered the true plot, just to let his guard down.

His stare turned arctic. Something that would have scared her without him being paralyzed from the neck down, tied with poisonous thorns to a throne.

She didn't wait for his response, slipping through the vines, avoiding the sharp thorns, unsure if they would transfer the potion if they broke skin.

From her vantage point, she saw the hairpin still protruding from his torso. She suspected if she tugged it out, he might bleed to death without intervention, but she only gently probed the wound— enough to steal a few droplets of blood. She didn't feel like testing the wards, unsure what they would do to her if she *actually* killed the heir.

"I want you to know that I got the idea for the pin from a muggle. It's not magical at all, so I knew you'd overlook it." In a muggle movie she'd watched with Draco, one of their healers had injected medicine into a patient. A fifth of the potion fit inside the decorative syringe. Even if created by magic and embedded with a single charm, it was not a true magical object, leaving it undetectable. She'd made it look like one of his mother's hair pins, just in case he discovered it.

He groaned and leaned his head back against the concrete, face draining of color. "It must have a neurological component, along with paralysis."

"No," she sneered. "That would be the poison I added in after."

“Poison...” He blinked in disbelief, as if to orient himself. “I don’t believe it. You couldn’t do that. Not in such a cold-blooded way. You may hate me, but you wouldn’t do that.”

She wasn’t ignorant enough to try and murder him on the grounds, and it wouldn’t work anyway. One requirement to become a mediator was gaining immunity through a small amount of exposure to most poisons.

Nothing she injected into him would kill him tonight. She only added the poison to delay his recovery in case the potion wore off faster, since she couldn’t use the full amount.

However, she’d let him believe she possessed the worst, most naive intentions.

Rummaging through his vest, she found nothing but the dark magic knife he always carried with him and his Death Eater mask. On a whim, she tugged out both and set them by her feet.

His wand remained trapped in his lap, regrettably too tangled with thorns to extract without pricking her finger.

But there was one thing she couldn’t leave without, and she knew he had it on him. She dug her hands into his pockets as well as she could, having to reach at an awkward angle.

Nothing! She almost despaired but then went back to his cloak. It didn’t look like it had pockets, but she had to try.

It took a full minute, his eyes following her movements silently the whole time, looking paler by the second. Wasted time, she thought at first. But then there— right there! Her fingers brushed along a tiny pocket in the lining near his shoulder, extracting the Black family key he always kept on him.

“This never belonged to you.” Hermione unsnapped one horrid shackle and then the other. “And neither did my magic.” She wished to destroy them, never wanting to feel their heavy weight again, but goblin made objects were always difficult to break.

Her magic rushed back. Painful. Glorious. Her nerves stung at the prolonged deprivation.

A witch should never be separated from her magic. It was a crime against nature to deny her something that flowed in her veins.

“You won’t get away from me like you think you will,” his words were slower. “You can say you don’t belong to me all you want, but you do.”

She ignored the threat.

As soon as the pain of renewed magic subsided, she attempted to conjure a Patronus. The spell resisted her at first, fingers still stinging. But eventually, the wispy form of her otter appeared in front of her, as beautiful as ever. She watched as it bounced away through the garden to her intended destination.

“For once, stop being self-destructive,” Titus continued. “Break the vines, help me reverse this, and *all* will be forgiven. I’ll never bring it up again, and there will be no punishment.”

He clenched his teeth, shaking his head, trying to stay conscious. “But if you’re foolish enough to leave tonight, I’ll hunt you down to the ends of this forsaken world, and there will be no more mercy or forgiveness from me ever again.”

Hermione pretended to waver, eyes wide, as if second guessing her decisions. She waited until he gained a little confidence, relaxing against the marble with the assuredness of a man who always won, and then she gave a harsh laugh.

“You’re still angry at me, I see,” Titus changed tactics. “Let’s make another deal.” Even though the poison must be making him feel terrible, slowly pulling him under, his bloodshot eyes stabbed her through his Beltane mask. “Just like last night, I’m willing to capitulate to some of your demands. List your grievances, and I’ll listen. You want your magic? I’ll consider a way for you to keep the shackles off at the manor. A real job? I’ll get your one. Release me now, and we’ll work on a compromise.”

“And if I don’t believe you enough to stay?”

His stare darkened when he tilted his head down. “You’d have nowhere to hide.”

“I already do.”

“Only for a time, because I’ll slaughter every single person who tries to harbor you, until no one would dare. And if I catch you— no, *when I catch you*— not a single soul trying to protect you will survive my wrath either. What I did at Manchester would seem benevolent. In fact, I’ll imperio *you* to butcher them yourself, which would be the last act of serious magic I’d ever allow you to perform. And after all that needless heartache, you’d end up right back where we started, except without your magic, no bargaining power, with more blood on your hands, back in the dungeons, and with me considerably angrier at you.”

She understood. The cost of staying. The cost of leaving. Both required a risk.

But like Carmen, she’d rather die than stay. Because staying would be a type of death she couldn’t endure, a fist slowly squeezing her soul until she vanished completely.

Titus waited for her answer, probably assured she’d change her mind, but she wouldn’t. And she needed to show him how serious she was.

“We’re far past silly deals.” She floated his beloved mask between them with wandless magic. It had been his father’s. Something he treasured. A symbol of his power and heritage. Made for terror. Watered with innocent blood. She’d planned to use his wand as a demonstration, but this would do as well.

“Think really hard about what you’re doing,” he warned, understanding her intent.

“This is for my wand.” It resisted her, but she’d broken harder things.

The glass mask shattered into hundreds of tiny pieces, raining into the pebbles between them.

He stared at the remnants with his mouth open, as if unable to believe she’d actually done it.

“Dolohov was right,” he whispered in a calm voice, still staring at his destroyed mask. “I’ve spoiled you too much. Given you the world. Given you my love. Given you more status than other muggleborns. Forgiven things I should not have forgiven. I loved your spirit too much to break it. In the aftermath of all your misbehavior, I’ve always been gentle and accommodating of your emotions.” He tried and failed to conceal his pain, flicking his stare to her. “You’ll regret this.”

He’d never done any of those things for free. She saw it clearly now. His gentleness with her had always been manipulative, used as a weapon to confuse her.

Perhaps he did love her in the only way he could love anyone, but it was a selfish love more akin to greed, excluding her agency. Her desires, ambitions, and happiness always placed secondary to his fear of losing her, of being alone in the cold world he created.

“I’ll feel a great many things,” she promised. “But regret will not be one of them.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it, seeming too ill to speak.

A crackle of pebbles drew her attention.

Draco followed her Patronus through the hedges, leading him to the Beltane circle, wearing the body of a lesser Wizengamot member whom he’d stolen a hair from— a disguise so an auror wouldn’t question him wandering the grounds. Wisely, he stayed outside the boundary.

The sight of him felt like sunshine. Like a sip of Felix Felicis.

She rushed toward him, and he caught her as she jumped, dragging her into a comforting hug. She didn’t want to kiss him as another person, and he didn’t seem to want another man’s lips on her either, because he only leaned his forehead onto hers.

“We need to go,” she begged when he let her down. “I don’t know how long the potion will hold.”

Or the poison. Or the polyjuice. Any of them could shed away before they completed their mission, though the amount she gave Titus should last until morning, if she did her calculations correct.

“*Malfoy*.” Titus glared at them with the full force of the Butcher. Without mercy. Without pity. A vow of his retribution, stripped of pardon.

“*Nott*.” Draco’s wand dangled from his fingers in Titus’ direction as if itching to use it, though he couldn’t. “Unlike you, I’m not going to pretend I’m not enjoying this moment. In fact, I promise to thoroughly fuck it later.”

“Always so stupidly arrogant. Did your father let you out of your manor?”

His eyes briefly flashed crimson. “No, that was all Granger. She has an uncanny knack for finding ward holes and other obscure ways out of manors. It was where she was heading when you caught her on my property. One that I didn’t even know about. Absolutely brilliant, she is, but I think you know that.” He motioned toward the vines.

“When it’s time, I won’t kill you.” Titus’ words began to slur. “Not at first. Not until you’re broken in the way I want you to be. The torture will last for years. I don’t even think I’d have to use physical methods, because I know exactly what would fuck you up mentally. You’ll be a shell of a human when I’m done.”

“While I’m grateful you’re getting more creative than your usual beheading threats, unfortunately you’re not very intimidating right now.” Draco twirled his wand with lazy confidence. “For years, you’ve been the biggest dog with the biggest bark, Nott. But I’m not a little dog anymore for you to try and bully like the others, if I ever even was.” He exposed the remnants of the dark curses he’d cast. Crimson eyes. Sharper canines. The pale skin of his arms, even in another body, streaked with dark veins. “My birthright is the cunning of my father and death magic from the Blacks. I possess every advantage of pureblood power and wealth that you do. And I will not hesitate to use all of them to rip out *your* throat if you ever come between Hermione and me again. If it wasn’t for your wards, I’d do it now.”

They glowered at each other in silence, each sizing up their opponent. Titus had always viewed Draco as a nuisance, a fly buzzing around his head, something easy to smack away. But right now, Titus possessed the same expression he did when talking about the Order or Sirius Black, finally seeing Draco as something so dangerous that he needed to slaughter it before it spread disease.

Nothing Lucius Malfoy could do or say could protect Draco from Titus after this. If they were caught, it wouldn’t just be Hermione’s freedom in danger.

Feeling the urgency to flee, Hermione walked back inside the circle of thrones. She bent down and grabbed the knife discarded in the pebbles, along with the shackles, making sure she still held the key.

“Tabitha once told me that I was your bird.” Hermione glanced up, letting their eyes meet for a long moment. Behind the fury was a painful pleading so great that she might have tried to soothe him years ago. “If you’ve ever loved me, you’ll let me fly away.”

“You need to fly?” He managed to lift his head to get closer. “Then make sure to use this moment to go as far as you can, Sprite, because eventually, you’ll have to land. The moment you close your eyes and rest, I’ll be there.”

The rage she suppressed for months boiled over. “For the last time, I’m *not* your precious Sprite! I’m not your breeder. I’m not your muggleborn. And I’m definitely not your fucking *wife*.”

“Sprite—”

“You will address me by my real name—*Hermione Granger*. The daughter of Robert Granger, the man who killed your parents. An orphan from murders in which you participated. A witch born from muggles! It’s time you accept that I’m no different from other muggleborns you hate and enslave. Not special or the exception to the hierarchy you helped create, just because you care for me. I *am* them. So listen closely.” She took a deliberate step forward, grabbed his chin, and bent close. “Kill my friends, and I’ll butcher



yours. Every last one. I won't be a soft victim for you to hunt; I'll be a formidable enemy to fight. And if you *ever* try to cage me again, I'll show you how alike we are."

His fury burned her soul, but she didn't wither with the heat, hoping he understood the lines she drew in the sand would be there forever.

She met his dark stare with her own. Just as cold. Just as cruel. Just as unforgiving.

Perhaps in that moment, he did see exactly who she was under the fake smiles and playing pretend.

As he told her once, they were cut from the same cloth. Why would he ever expect her to be different?

"Goodbye." She let go of his chin, finally ready to leave it all behind. Their mission for the day was not done, and she refused to waste any more of their remaining time.

"Don't worry, Nott, Granger's safe with me," Draco taunted, while waiting at the ritual circle boundary. "My future *wife's* wellbeing is my top priority. I'll take good care of her in every way you can imagine. She'll never be unsatisfied."

Titus looked apoplectic when Hermione positioned the obsidian shackles around the vines, snapping them on him one after the other. He grit his teeth, growing even paler with the uncomfortable sensation of smothered magic, and she didn't repress her satisfaction, hoping he understood now the torture he'd made her endure for months.

"Don't leave," he finally sounded desperate, as if realizing for the first time that she truly did plan on escaping him, and nothing he could threaten or promise could stop her. "Please, don't make me your adversary."

Hermione slid her hands along the curves of her dress, changing the red silk into a stark black, showing she'd never belong to him again. It was a colour separate from her status or use to the purebloods, reminding her of her favorite things— of outer space, of onyx, of ink. A colour she chose just for herself.

"You already are my adversary, Titus, and you always have been."

Without looking back, Hermione picked up her black skirt and fled into the dark.

## Chapter End Notes

This is Part 1 of Beltane. Part 2 is about 80% edited and should be posted in a week or two, if time allows.

On updates: this chapter and the next combined will be 20k plus words. To put that in perspective, that's 1/5 (or more) of a normal novel. Please PLEASE don't speculate publicly that my fic is abandoned just because it's been a few months. That amount of time to write/ edit/ polish is perfectly reasonable (and even fast) compared to publishing standards. I love when people express excitement for future updates, but demands or expectations only slow me down. Barring extreme circumstances, I will NOT abandon this fic. I've finished long fics before this. It just takes time. Do not despair that all updates will take as long as the last few. Not every chapter will be as long or complicated, and toward the very end of stories I tend to speed up. Thanks for your patience!

# Chapter 55: Severed Roots

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestion:

System of a Down– “B.Y.O.B.”

Frank Walker, Two Feet– “Day by Day”

A big thank you to my alpha team and my beta, MyPrivateInsanity. They helped me find so many little edits and plot holes. This story is 100% better because of their help!

Trigger Warnings at the bottom:

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

## Severed Roots

Hermione sprinted through the maze, clutching Draco’s hand. They didn’t stop until they reached the Harpy Statue near one of the entrances.

A body lay on the stone at the base, still breathing but unconscious and frozen. His badge gleamed under the moonlight, identifying him.

“An auror,” she said in surprise.

“The polyjuice proved useful.” Draco’s eyes flashed crimson. “He never even saw it coming, thinking I was just taking a stroll in the gardens.”

“You shouldn’t have even risked a Petrificus Totalus. We don’t know the extent of the wards.”

“The grounds are always less warded than the buildings.”

That was true. Even in the manor, there were layers, getting more complicated the further in a person travelled. The master bedroom and the dungeons were warded with the most dangerous ones, almost impenetrable under the right conditions.

Despite the risk, Draco incapacitated an auror, which left only three roaming the property.

“We don’t have to do what you planned.” Draco’s grip tightened around her hand. “Let’s go now. We can figure out something else later. There are too many variables I can’t solve.”

“It will haunt me if I don’t. They need me.”

“And I *need* you.” He closed his eyes tight and took a breath. “This is all my fault for choosing such a stubborn witch. Fuck, fine, we’ll do it, but we need to make it quick. Are you sure Titus is secured?”

“He’s unable to call for the elves while in the ritual circle. I gave him the potion, the poison, and I smothered his magic. He’s as defanged as he can be. At least for a couple of hours... I hope.” She glanced around the clearing, trying to slough away her nerves. “I don’t intend to dally in the manor. We just need to find Harry first.”

“I’m here!” A familiar invisibility cloak fluttered to the ground, revealing Harry Potter sprinting to a stop, closely floating a bound and silenced Theo. “You took long enough.”

“You try and incapacitate the Butcher by yourself and see how fast you can do it,” Hermione snapped.

Theo began to struggle, but it proved short lived. When he noticed Hermione’s lack of concern, he stopped, eyes widening with betrayal as he realized she’d helped orchestrate his kidnapping.

“Did you manage to convince anyone else to help?” She ignored her brother’s silent indignation.

Harry gave a nod. “Ten people, including me.”

Less than she hoped, but it would have to do. They’d both agreed not to tell Sirius, unsure if he’d support his favoured godson performing such a risky operation. The people Harry approached were the only ones he trusted enough not to snitch.

She motioned to Theo. “Unbind him.”

Harry vanished the ropes, setting her brother on the ground. Theo crossed his arms, glowering.

“I know you’re angry,” Hermione started. “Just listen first.”

Theo scowled, resembling Titus. *Go ahead*, he mouthed.

“I need you to invite Harry’s friends into the manor.”

She lifted the silencio for his response and promptly regretted it.

“Invite them into the manor!” He shouted. “What are you even doing? I— I won’t stop you— or I don’t think I would anyway, but I’m not sure how much I—”

“I’m escaping tonight.”

Theo’s expression softened. “I gathered that, and I can’t deny that I’m relieved, but I don’t understand why you need—”

“The muggleborns trapped inside that manor are no different from me, Theo.” She pointed to his ancestral home. “How they’re treated is intolerable. Not everyone can be saved, but Harry and the others can’t get inside without an invitation. It just so happens you’re the only Nott available.”

“Maybe we could find another way—”

“No, this is our only chance. I understand I’m asking you to make a difficult choice—” Her voice cracked, hating that she cared so much. “But I’m still going to ask it of you, because you can’t be neutral in this.”

The challenge rested in the air. Theo’s bottom lip wobbled. “This is far more serious than any other time I’ve helped you. Titus would punish me. Maybe severely. If he connects the dots, which *he will*, I’ll have to give up my career, at the very least.”

She did not deny the risk or sacrifice. As a pureblood son and only brother to Titus Nott, Theo held status and wealth, his place in society secure, everything he wanted in reach. He never had to worry about food or other comforts, and he only worked to fulfill a passion. Giving up that security would be no small thing in this world.

“Is Titus—”

“He’s alive,” she soothed his worry. “Just bound. He won’t interfere.”

“Please, Theo,” Harry whispered at his back.

Theo flinched at the voice, as if he’d tried to forget who stood behind him. He took a final deep breath, glanced back at Harry, cheeks reddening. “I’ll help you.”

Hermione launched herself at him in gratitude, and he caught her in a tight hug, burying his face into her hair.

Theo turned his attention to Draco while still holding her. “Even if I invite the others inside, you shouldn’t enter the manor. Titus probably set up special wards just for you that I wouldn’t be able to circumnavigate.”

Draco sneered at that, but didn’t argue, understanding the truth behind it. “If anything happens to her Potter, just know that I’m blaming you.”

---

Theo issued the invitations, and Hermione reluctantly left Draco, making plans to meet him after. She ran alone to her old room first, only gathering up the purse she’d charmed to be bottomless, along with some flats.

Leaving behind all her glittering jewels, ivory combs, and silk dresses, she next made her way to the study, sneaking past the portraits when they weren’t looking.

She searched the corridor just long enough to be sure no aurors prowled close by before slipping inside the study.

The room appeared sinister, empty of life, the imposing desk sitting like a sentinel in front of the window, curtains opened. The moonlight provided enough illumination to see as she once again multiplied the blood from Titus' wound on her palm, pressing it into the drawer.

It popped open like it had the night before.

Not bothering to sort through it all, she shoved the entire contents of his drawer into her bottomless purse, one rare potion and ingredient vial after the other. She gathered her father's papers and her friends' remaining wands next and lovingly set them inside. The skin-bound book exited last, pulsing with dark, sticky power, thrumming under her fingers, before vanishing into the silk interior with the rest.

Something caught her eye in the depths of the drawer. She reached into the back, extended by charms, and pulled out an obsidian key which matched her old shackles.

Hermione grinned at the lucky find. Obsidian shackles were nearly impossible to get off without the key made for it, and she'd taken the universal Black key too, leaving him truly stuck.

The image of a mortified Titus trudging to Gringotts to beg help from the goblins to free his smothered magic gave her a *deep* satisfaction.

She slipped the key inside with the rest.

Needing nothing else, Hermione vanished like a ghost.

---

Hermione touched up her makeup with a charm in the old, enchanted mirror in the corridor, leaving her hair down. She left the dress black, refusing to ever wear red again. It didn't matter. The guests would be too drunk, and the fellow costumes too outlandish, to garner any true suspicion.

"That colour looks garish on you." The mirror was supposed to sing her compliments but had never liked her.

"You're just jealous I can actually wear a dress, you incorporeal hag."

With the confidence of Titus, she strutted into the ballroom— as if she belonged and nothing at all was amiss.

No one noticed her.

Some of the guests had already made their way home to perform their own rituals. The rest enjoyed the party, twirling around on the dance floor, indulging in the wine and mountains of food, unsuspecting of the danger in their midst.

Finding Carmen proved easy. As always, she sat toward the back with a familiar scowl. No one else remained at the table with her, and when Hermione neared, Carmen's expression didn't change.

“Where’s your master?” Hermione asked.

Carmen opened her purse. “Discussing pointless topics with semi-important people. He’s heard news that I’ve befriended you from other sources and wishes to capitalize on it.

This time Hermione grimaced. She reached out as if to shake Carmen’s hand and slipped the tiny cauldron into her palm, still wrapped in a napkin. “What do I do next?”

“Don’t drink the champagne.”

---

The kitchens smelled of bread and sugar. For all the food it produced, the counters gleamed, the elf magic working overtime. Pots bubbled on the stove, still steaming, and she glimpsed the multiple ovens baking desserts. Several hired elves ran from place to place, but she stepped around them.

Hermione found Eddy beating eggs in the corner. When he noticed her approaching, he jumped with fright, placing a tiny hand over his heart. “Mistress Hermione should not be in the kitchen!”

“There was no other choice, Eddy. Titus wants to give a champagne toast, but Bitty and the hired elves are so busy that I didn’t want to disturb them with such a small task. Can I select the bottles for him?”

Eddy narrowed his eyes, not liking to be interrupted in the kitchens with an unapproved request, but since it didn’t conflict with any of his orders, eventually he hopped off his stool, guiding her to the cellar.

She stood before a row of old champagne bottles, already chilled, and glanced down at the elf. “Thank you, Eddy. I’ll be fine by myself. I’ll leave the bottles I select on the counter. In five minutes *exactly*, send up the champagne. Use the flutes his mother bought from Italy. Theo will perform the toast tonight.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Hermione waited until Eddy left to take the first bottle off the shelves and uncork them with magic.

---

“I thought you only needed me to invite people inside?” Theo stared at her with wide, terrified eyes.

They’d already explained the potion to him, but he still dragged his feet.

“This is the last thing I’ll ask of you tonight.”

“You’re not going to kill anyone, are you?” Theo glanced around the ballroom at the unsuspecting guests, many of them sloshed. “I wouldn’t be okay with that.”

Hermione clenched her fists, irritated at his hesitation. “I wouldn’t trust the wards enough to do that. I don’t even think I could use simple offensive spells. We only want them incapacitated to prevent needless fighting.”

“I don’t like this.”

Hermione grabbed the hand clutching his wand, transferring it to his neck. “We don’t have time for your stage fright.”

“This is not stage fright,” he protested. “This is me reevaluating your insane plans... as usual. But do you ever listen to me?”

“No.” She pointed to the stage. “Now go.”

“Oh, all right. Absolutely mental, as always. I’m not sure where you learned it. Certainly not from me.” Theo swallowed hard and walked to the stage with the musicians and singers like a condemned man toward the gallows.

Hermione positioned herself near a half-empty table off to the side. Abigail sat alone near her, staring despondently at her dessert, moving pieces of cake around with her fork. On the other side of the table, a Wizengamot member talked with an envoy from Estonia with Yaxley nowhere to be seen.

Theo scaled the steps. The music died off, and he tugged at the collar of his neon green healer robes, which he hadn’t had time to remove.

The tip of his wand glowed at his throat as he cleared it, projecting his voice while making a small noise for attention. The crowd stopped dancing, the remaining guests turning toward him expectantly. Though it was odd to see healer robes at a ball, it wasn’t out of place to give a toast, and he *was* a Nott. According to pureblood customs, it would be rude to refuse to participate— which worked out perfectly for her.

“Thank you for coming to the Nott Beltane celebration.” Theo looked as if he wanted to die from anxiety, shifting on his feet. “Please join me for a final toast. Titus is... busy at the moment, and he asked me to perform the honours.”

Bitty and the hired elves floated trays around the room, filled with flutes of the bubbling champagne. The guests plucked them off like flowers, one by one. Hermione grabbed one to blend in as well, heart pounding. When finished, the elves apparated back to the kitchens to finish off dessert, where she hoped they’d stay, or she’d acquire the unpleasant task of constraining them.

Theo waited until they’d dispersed the alcohol, clutching his own.

“A blessing for Beltane,” he started. “For luck, peace, and prosperity for the year ahead.” He seemed a little more confident as he raised his flute in the air. “Magic is might!”

“Magic is might!” The crowd cheered after him, flutes tilting to drink, while Theo only pretended.



In front of her, Abigail raised the champagne to her lips, but before she could sip, Hermione swatted the glass from her hand. It shattered on the ground, soaking the front of Abigail's dress.

As if waking from a trance, she gasped in outrage. "What was that for—"

Roots exploded from the floor, cracking through tile, poking through walls, splintering windows. Deafening screams erupted. More glass broke as forgotten flutes struck the ground. Chairs clattered as people attempted to run, but it was in vain.

The potion acted as a magnet, seeking its victims. Foliage twisted and choked, vines wrapping along the escaping bodies, trapping them in place mid-run, wrapping them up like mummies in spiked vegetation.

In the chaos, Harry jumped out from under the cloak near her in preparation for the potential retaliation.

The main entrance to the ballroom burst open, and eight Order members stumbled inside led by another patronus, including Ron, the Weasley twins, and someone who she thought might be Seamus. They dispersed in different directions, resembling scattering insects, melding into the wall of foliage on their own missions.

Hermione almost joined them, but a blue spell struck just above her head, colliding with the wall behind her. Abigail screamed and ducked. Raising her wrists, Hermione tried to see where it originated, but the vegetation obstructed her view, slowly growing wilder by the minute. The room was a miniature forest, roots spread like a spider's web, paralyzed people caught in its sticky trap, covering the floor and the gilded walls— even the ceiling. Giant leaves sprouted on the vines, covered in lethal thorns. The abundance of it surprised her, not having planned to navigate around it.

"Don't curse back!" Hermione tried to shout over the noise, unsure who posed a threat or where. But Harry must have already warned his friends, because from what she could see, the Order only used evasive techniques and innocuous shield charms.

However, the guests didn't know Titus paid for extra restrictions on the manor.

Binding spells snapped around the room, over and over again, capturing anyone who cast anything more than a light defensive spell.

The fighting didn't last long. Like they'd hoped, most drank the toast, the vines subduing them. The rest either hid themselves, deciding not to fight a group of terrorists, or had already succumbed to the binding protections.

Within a minute, Ron Weasley remained the only person duelling, dodging curses with the ease of an auror. He battled against an older man with grey hair who she believed to be Carmen's master in the middle of the ballroom dance floor, giving her a clear view, close enough to be heard around the noise.

“He has a bad left knee!” Hermione shouted. She’d noticed him limp when she’d studied the guests entering the floo.

Following her advice, Seamus snuck up behind Ron’s attacker, striking him in the back of the knee with a swift kick, attempting to yank the wand from his hands.

Carmen’s master acted in startled desperation. “Avada Kedavra!”

The green light narrowly missed its target— but the wards retaliated.

One moment the man stood upright, a snarl on his face; the next, an invisible force lashed out. Blood misted into a fine cloud, leaving Carmen’s master’s body parts in a pile, the flesh stripped from muscle and bone, as if he’d just unzipped his skin like a dress.

“Bloody hell!” Ron straightened, red freckles of blood joining his real ones.

Seamus tried and failed to use cleaning charms to swipe away the gore covering him, gagging when he wiggled a dislodged eyeball off his shoe.

Hermione blinked in shock. She knew objectively the wards could kill, but she’d never seen them in action. Observing their power only strengthened her resolve to leave, knowing it could be used against them if Titus managed to get free.

Three aurors remained somewhere on the property, and she didn’t think they’d be as easy to subdue as the one in the garden. Unlike the guests, they had permission to use unforgivables, making them far more dangerous. Only the sound dampening charms on the walls of the ballroom protected them from discovery.

Titus’ trust in his wards benefited them. The massive Nott property sprawled across the countryside in every direction. If all the aurors had been on duty, they might not have made it out without conflict, but they could potentially evade three— if they hurried.

“What’s happening?” Abigail’s voice sounded like a little girl’s, afraid of monsters. She looked even paler than she’d been at lunch crouching next to her.

“We’re getting out of here,” Hermione said. “Come with us. Leave this behind.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“They took him from me— my little boy. I couldn’t stop it. They did it while I was asleep. I don’t know which family he’s with, and I can’t leave him behind.”

Hermione couldn’t imagine the horror of waking to find her baby missing.

“I’m sorry. I can’t solve that for you right now, even if I wish I could.” She pointed to Abigail’s distended stomach. “But they’ll rip this one away next if you stay. I heard Titus talking about it to Yaxley. And then your new master will get you pregnant again. And on and

on and on it will go. Where we're escaping to, no one would ever do that. This baby will be *yours*."

She blinked, absorbing the information. "You promise?"

"I promise." Hermione held out her hand. Abigail hesitated before taking it.

They ran as fast as a heavily pregnant woman could manage, stepping gingerly around the vines slowly growing around the room.

The room now reeked of fresh death—an acrid scent that always made her want to retch—and she suppressed the desire to cover her nose.

As they'd planned, several Order members gathered in the middle of the ballroom floor. The lights overhead spotlighted them with charms, showcasing Harry, Theo, and Carmen, the latter of whom didn't even glance at the remains of her decapitated master.

Five men she didn't recognize held paralyzed muggleborns in red costumes they must have ripped from the vines, bodies left littered with tiny wounds from the thorns. None of the women shouted in protest to be released, displaying consent to the rescue, besides an unconscious older muggleborn who looked as if she'd fainted in fright.

While she watched, the roots slithered up the men's legs, attempting to bind them again, seeking the potion in their veins. The speed of the roots had slowed down considerably since the initial chaos, so the men risked a few cutting curses, severing the foliage before it could constrict.

It showed her that heavier curses *could* be used inside the manor, just not directed toward people.

"Don't wait for us," Harry ordered. "Get back to the safehouse before the aurors arrive."

The men obeyed without objection or hesitation, sprinting from view with their charges toward one of several double doors, bypassing an Order member with bright purple hair working on freeing a bespectacled muggleborn she recognized from the lunches.

Seamus followed the fleeing men, still covered in gore, holding a dark-haired woman in a green dress. From his dour expression, he must know her, vanishing quickly out of sight to escape.

"What are we waiting for?" Hermione asked Harry.

He shifted on his feet, glancing around as if suddenly aware he was in the home of the man who killed his father. "They're searching for someone."

One of the twins—Fred, she believed—foraged a table nearby, popping a chocolate covered strawberry in his mouth. He leaned close to a woman in blue, unclasping her jewelled necklace, wrapping it around his own. "Sapphires really bring out my eyes."

George worked at an opposite table, nicking a top hat and a couple of cigars. “Thanks mate. I’m sure you aren’t going to use these.” He grinned and put what he’d stolen in his pocket.

“We don’t have time for games,” she said, feeling frustrated. “Let’s go.”

“Not until we find Ginny!” Ron rushed past her toward the nearest table like his brothers, inspecting the guests at a frantic pace. The vines made it difficult to tell who was who.

Of course. Their sister.

Hermione stopped them. “I know where she might be.”

Ron didn’t question her as she wandered through the new maze of vines and giant leaves the size of elephant ears, the roots thickened along the tile floor. The screams had mostly died down. Many of the guests remained dazed or unconscious from injury or the potion overwhelming their system. However, the purebloods who endured the shock spit and cursed as they passed. A few unbound guests, mostly women in blue and green dresses, hid under the tables, peeking out with terrified expressions, scared enough not to try to attack a group of Order members.

Hermione led Ron toward the table she’d sat at earlier. As she hoped, a waterfall of bright red hair caught her eye, unmistakably Weasley, with Rosier beside her. They’d been standing when the vines paralyzed them. Rosier had his arm out for a toast, the other snaked around Ginny’s waist. Only their heads moved, twisting toward them as they neared.

Ron tugged on the vines, avoiding the thorns. “Fred! George! Over here. I found her.”

The extraction proved difficult. Each time Ron snapped a vine, another sprouted. But he persisted, and Hermione helped. If the potion had been at full efficacy, they probably wouldn’t have been able to free her, but she’d watered it down significantly, and so eventually they overcame the vines, and Ginny tumbled into Ron’s arms.

Fred and George barreled into view, skidding to a stop, now adorned with several more jewels and accessories they’d stolen, the mischief stripped from their expressions.

“Ron?” Ginny blinked, seeming confused. “Is that you? What are you doing here?”

“Thank fuck you remember me. I’m bringing you home, of course.”

“Home?” She seemed confused. “Why would you take me from him?”

“Because he hurt you.”

“Evan wouldn’t do that. He loves me... I think.”

He shook his head. “Oh, Gin.”

Rosier gave a mocking laugh. “You might as well leave her. Most of the damage is permanent.”

Ron shoved his sister into Fred's arms, and then, red-faced, he lunged at Rosier as if to strangle him. Hermione and George grabbed onto him at the last second. In this state, he'd murder Rosier, which might activate the wards.

"You can't kill him now," Hermione begged, almost slipping into a tangle of thorns. "If we don't escape, they'll execute you and give Ginny back. Is that what you want?"

Ron stopped wrestling forward and shoved off the arms holding him. He panted, struggling to control his rage.

"Tell Charlie I said hello," Rosier taunted. "And be sure to also tell him that this was for the dragon fire burn he gave me that won't fucking heal. The constant pain of it is— well, he should be grateful I only scrambled her mind a little and didn't place her on the execution block where she belongs. I don't even like women much, but even I can admit she's very pretty. Each time I fucked her, I thought of how much it would hurt your entire family of pathetic blood traitors."

George looked wan— something incongruous to his nature. Fred kept Ginny held close as if he might lose her if he let up a fraction.

Ron straightened and pointed his finger at Rosier, almost touching his nose. "Very soon I'll let Etelka finish the job she started. She'll eat you as her snack."

Rosier's eyes narrowed in a cruel way. "You know, I prefer men. Maybe next time I'll take you—"

Ron slammed his fist into Rosier's face before he could finish speaking. His head snapped back with the force, nose crunching sideways, eyes rolling back into unconsciousness.

"Slimy bastard." Ron shook his fist, knuckles red from the impact. "Merlin, that was satisfying." He turned to Hermione. "Are you sure we can't kill him the muggle way? I promise to make it quick."

"Do you really want to test the wards and end up in pieces?"

Ron sneered, as if contemplating how much he was willing to risk. Eventually, he pulled back, controlling himself enough to turn away from Rosier, leaving his revenge behind for another day.

---

The vines tried to snag Ginny as they ran, and Hermione finally risked an incendio for one that got too close. The burned foliage hissed and retreated, dripping acid on the floor.

When they once again reached the center of the ballroom, they found a much smaller group waiting for them. Abigail stood next to Carmen, clutching her belly, clearly in pain.

Harry's face blanched paler than the twins at the sight of a paralyzed Ginny, covered in wounds, but he recovered quickly. "Thank Godric you found her! Everyone else is already gone, and I don't want to stay a second longer."

Theo shook his head. “I think this is where we need to say goodbye. I’d come with you, but St. Mungo’s is understaffed and—”

Harry grabbed Theo by his shoulders and shook, as if to force sense into him. “You’re coming with us this time. Even if your reason to join isn’t me, we’re in desperate need of a healer—” He cut himself off, noticing Hermione. “What’s wrong?”

She didn’t meet his stare. A growing dread pooled in her stomach, spiking across her body in waves. “I don’t know. Something doesn’t feel right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought I’d have to evade an auror. Maybe even risk killing one, since the wards won’t retaliate against me, except to bind me. But I haven’t seen one.”

The group grew silent, as if she’d infected everyone with her fears. They didn’t want to confront the aurors, but the lack of them was somehow even more ominous.

“Do we have everyone?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Ron answered.

“Then let’s go.”

Everyone agreed, beginning their climb over vines and thorns out of the room.

---

Near the exit, Hermione stumbled to a stop, recognizing bright blonde hair.

Luna Lovegood stood covered in vines, still conscious and singing a tune under her breath, smiling at the ceiling.

Hermione stepped forward to yank her out, feeling guilty that she’d forgotten her in the chaos.

But then her rational mind caught up with her.

Luna had been at their planning sessions. She knew the champagne would be spiked— and she’d drunk it anyway.

Did she wish to stay for the Goyles? It seemed impossible, but all the evidence pointed to that conclusion. She stood side by side with Greg.

Despite the act going against her instincts to save her new friend from pureblood clutches, she’d honour the choice.

Hermione gave a sad smile to her favorite nargle, making a desperate wish to the universe for her friend’s happiness and that one day they could meet again under better circumstances.

---

Hermione led the group down the corridors, ignoring the whispers of the portraits. They'd always liked her as a child, viewing her as an honorary Nott, but they must sense she'd done something unspeakable to their master and to the manor, because when she asked for help avoiding the aurors like she had at Malfoy manor, they turned their noses up at her, muttering foul things under their breath. They even denied Theo when he asked, a few of the oldest patriarchs spitting "blood traitor" as they rushed past.

She stopped trying to convince them halfway to her destination, knowing she now had to traverse the rest of the manor blind, unable to tell where the aurors prowled.

In a rarely used section of the East wing, a lump in the corridor obstructed their path.

"Wait here," she told the others.

She inched closer only to find a badly injured Order member. His rescued muggleborn was missing, taken from him. Blood pooled out of his torso onto the rug below, but his chest still slowly rose and fell, and he blinked at her.

He was alive!

She reached down to examine the wound. "Theo, can he be healed?"

Her brother came forward, took one long look at the man, and shook his head. "Only at St. Mungo's. The lacerations are too deep. Organs are involved. I'd need potions."

St. Mungo's would only save the Order member to hand him to Titus for interrogation and torture. She couldn't subject him to that fate.

Dark eyes stared up at her, conscious even with the injury. Blood dripped from the side of his mouth, but he managed to speak, words garbled. "They thought... I'd died." He took a moment to rest, struggling to talk. "A trap."

He didn't finish, but she could guess. The aurors secured their intended exit, maybe others, attempting to trap them, probably already calling on reinforcements. They'd only left the man behind because they thought they'd killed him.

She grasped his hand. "Did the others get out?"

He didn't answer that, glancing to the right. "Potter... help me."

Harry walked closer, lips in a thin line. He leaned down and placed a finger into the man's mouth, pressing on a back tooth. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Go in peace, Dedalus."

A small crack. A false tooth, she assumed, filled with poison like Garner had so many years ago. The man gasped once in relief, and several seconds later he went limp.

Hermione didn't wait to let Harry or the others mourn. Knowing an auror covered her intended exit and probably others, she changed plans, traversing a longer way to a tunnel

connected to the grounds in the west wing that she and Theo had found behind a bookcase as children.

They managed the rest of the journey through the manor without surprises, not even the elves, who must know by now something went terribly wrong. But Eddy was a kitchen elf and Bitty a nanny. Neither were equipped to fight. They'd attempt to locate Titus first, which they'd find difficult with the magic caging them outside the boundary.

When the group finally exited through a trap door near the greenhouse into the dark chill of midnight, they stopped and pulled out their brooms.

Ron zoomed off first, Ginny cradled in his lap, her limp body glued to the broom with a sticking charm. Abigail mounted Fred's broom awkwardly, and Carmen climbed on in front of George. Covered in jewels and flamboyant accessories, the twins tapped themselves and their charges with disillusionment charms. Still slightly visible and shimmering, they both launched into the air on their rickety Cleansweeps at a faster rate than she expected.

Harry straddled an expensive Firebolt, turning to Theo. "Your robes will be hard to hide even with the cloak unless you want to take them off." They both paused after he said that, cheeks painted an equal amount of pink. Harry scratched the back of his neck. "Anyway, I suppose the aurors wouldn't dare curse Titus Nott's brother. Being with you makes me less of a target."

Theo shifted his feet and fidgeted.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Are you going to fight this?"

"You say you need a healer?"

"We do."

"Then I'll go." Theo accepted his fate and climbed on the broom, still blushing fiercely, but Harry didn't leave right away like the others, searching the grounds around them. "Where's Malfoy? He should be here, right? He knew to come here second."

Hermione bit her thumb, trying not to panic. "I don't know."

"He'll show," Harry soothed. "He wouldn't leave without you."

He wouldn't, which meant something held him up. Her stomach clenched with nerves, regretting the separation, even if they had no other choice.

When she'd first explained her plans, Draco hadn't wanted to go along with it after calculating the risks, only relenting to help when she insisted she'd do it anyway. If something were to happen to him, she'd never forgive herself.

Something must be wrong. The instinctual warning deep in her gut prickled down her arms, spiking her magic with her anxiety.

"Do you want us to wait with you—"



“No need. I’m here.” Draco stepped around the bushes, taking off a skilled disillusionment—a much better one than the twins. During their time apart, the polyjuice had dissipated, leaving him in his real body. “Go on, Potter.”

Harry didn’t wait a second more. Throwing the cloak over both of them, he launched away with Theo, disappearing into the dark. Like Harry warned, neon green flashed occasionally as the cloak fluttered in the wind.

Hermione drank in the sight of Draco, his hair the color of the moon above. His cheeks had flushed pink as if he’d been running. “Where were you?”

He gave a furtive glance around. “My father. He’s here.”

She almost froze in terror. If there was a wizard as dangerous as Titus, it might be Lucius Malfoy. She’d honestly prefer running into an auror. “How did he get on the property?”

“Titus gave him permission to use whatever means necessary to stop me as a last resort.” Draco already had his broom out, wand in his other hand. He grabbed her when he got within reach and slung her in front of him as he got on his broom. “My father knew I left the manor, so he’s been tracking me. I’ve only just evaded—”

“You have *not* evaded me,” a voice warned from the darkness.

Draco heaved a sigh, looking to the stars before turning to his father as he stepped into view. Lucius held his wand out, pointed at his son. He seemed oddly disheveled. Pale skin. Dark under eyes. His usual perfect straight hair had crinkled just out of place.

In a duel, she didn’t know who would win. Father pitted against son. Each as strategic and clever as the other.

“You can’t stop me this time,” Draco said. “Hold tight, Granger.”

“Your arms,” Lucius sounded dazed. “I’d heard the rumors, but I didn’t want to believe you’d be foolish enough to use the Black grimoire. What have you done to yourself?”

The dark magic had overcome Draco’s occlumency. The black veins on his forearms writhed as if begging to lash out with his hate, and his eyes glowed a burning red when he twisted again toward his father. “It’s your fault I turned into this, and I’ll never forgive you for it. Now lower your wand, or I swear on mother’s grave that I’ll kill you.”

She’d never seen Lucius horrified before. His eyes trailed slowly over his son’s body as if he didn’t recognize him. Draco had once been a boy, relying on his father’s guidance and protection. But now he was a man, dangerous enough to raise an inferi.

“Draco... Nott was becoming deranged. I couldn’t let it continue. I saw the danger. He’d have eliminated you if I hadn’t made my deals. I did what I had to—”

“This is my last warning!”

“You’d kill me?” Again, Lucius seemed shocked. “You’d give up everything I’ve worked hard to give you... all for her?” The last sentence wasn’t a true question, more a statement, as if trying to understand.

“I already have, and I will again. The Malfoy name means nothing to me and neither do you.”

Lucius flinched, and his gaze snapped to her. He hated her more than he’d hated anyone. It was clear in his expression. If he could get away with murdering her, he would. Instead, he gave a slow nod— one of acknowledgement. “I have no choice now. Your crimes are too great. The Wizengamot would not pardon you, and even if they did, Nott wouldn’t let his hatred rest until he got his revenge, regardless if I subdued you now or not.” He lowered his wand. “I want one promise.”

“I owe you nothing.”

Lucius grimaced. “Find a way to France. I’ve already pulled favours from their government to hide you, just in case. Live your life. Marry her, if you wish, though I detest the thought. Have children. Cease using death magic immediately, and one day, I’ll find you again.”

“I neither want nor need your favours, and I won’t be going to France just so you can control me from afar.”

“Son, think about your—”

“Where I’m going, you’ll never find me, and I won’t ever return to see you or anyone else.”

Lucius shook his head as if unable to comprehend it. “I don’t believe this is the last I’ll see of you. I refuse that future. But if I’m to endure years of separation, then allow me to give you a parting gift. An act of contrition to my only son. I shouldn’t have underestimated your desire for her, and I’m willing to pay the price for that miscalculation... if it means your forgiveness.”

“I told you that I don’t want your—”

With a swish of Lucius’ wand and a nonverbal spell, three bodies appeared, silencing Draco as they slowly floated to the ground. Their silver badges gleamed in the moonlight much like the one incapacitated in the gardens.

Aurors— all dead, eyes open and glazed. By the lack of wounds, he must have used the killing curse, sacrificing small sections of his soul to complete the act.

Hermione’s mouth opened in surprise.

Lucius had already known his son’s decision to leave, and with his ability to use more lethal spells, he’d instead hunted down and eliminated as many threats as he could to help them escape.

That’s why they hadn’t run into any of the aurors— Lucius had murdered them with ruthless efficiency, probably as they set their traps.

It did little to soothe her, knowing reinforcements might still be on their way. Any minute now, and they'd crawl across Nott Manor.

Draco's grip around her tightened, the only show of emotion he'd allow.

Before he could formulate a response, a loud boom sounded in the distance. An odd snap and crack followed that she couldn't identify.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Fuck," Draco cursed. "We're running out of time."

A bulky mass lifted into the air over the trees, blocking out a section of stars, flying right toward them.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to see in the dark, and then gasped, recognizing it.

The Gryphon statue flew in their direction. Others followed soon after: one, then two, three, and four, until she lost count. Snaps and cracks. Groans as solid concrete ripped away from bases. An army of carved stone animated to slaughter intruders rose into the sky.

"Go," Lucius shouted. "Go now!"

Draco glanced back once, seeming unable to say anything in return. Not a scathing last stab or a heartfelt goodbye. Not an expression of hate or love. However, something silent passed between father and son that she couldn't interpret.

Without a quick shove off the ground, Draco shot into the night sky. He owned the latest model of broom, sleek and black and made for speed. When they'd flown together previously, he'd gone at a reasonable pace so as not to scare her, but he gave her no such comfort now.

A dragon in the distance blew pebbled fire, eyes glowing red, flying toward them faster than she'd ever thought possible. A hippogriff followed close behind, and under them a giant golden eagle beat its wings, beak opening to give a horrible, grating cry. The unnatural sound prickled down her spine, and she pointed her toes down as if that could make them go faster.

Other statues not made for flight crawled out of their maze, ready to gore or devour any remaining threats left along the ground.

It only took Hermione a second to understand the implications. The only person capable of animating the statues was the master of the manor.

Titus was free of the vines. The potion holding him must have dissipated faster than she'd intended, probably due to his overlapping immunity to most volatile ingredients in poisons.

His magic should still be caged, but he didn't need it. The statues were similar to the cauldron and the transfer bag, magical objects crafted long ago with charms embedded inside. They only required a drop of Nott blood to activate them and a verbal order to defend the manor and its master.

A Wyvern surprised them from their left, almost snagging them with sharpened stone teeth. It snapped near Draco's leg as he barrel-rolled. She screamed, feeling ill from the movement. During a flip, she glanced down, viewing the ground, imagining smashing into it. The eagle came from their right, controlled by Titus through glowing eyes, almost grabbing her shoulders with its talons, but Draco dipped down and flipped up at a nauseating speed.

"Hold on tighter," Draco said. "We're about to go even faster."

"How is that possible?"

She soon found out. Draco zoomed deftly around the attacking statues, flicking over and around, twisting into sharp corkscrew turns, using every evasive technique he'd learned in quidditch, until her vision faded at the edges, and her fingers felt disconnected from her body.

The dragon stayed close to their broom bristles, just as dangerous as a real one, pebbles raining down on them when it roared. After a close snap of teeth, Draco risked an expulso, shattering the statue with a burst of blue light. A quick protego protected them from the projectile shards as the large remnants fell over one of the ponds, sinking to the bottom.

But it didn't last. Moments later, the dragon sliced out of the water, whole again, charging toward them with droplets of water dripping off it like a rain cloud.

Closer and closer they flew toward the ward hole. Hermione held her breath, afraid if she moved at all, she'd impede their progress.

During a sudden barrel roll around the eagle, she glanced at the ground again, surprised to see a person running toward them in the distance.

Her vision cleared enough to see Carmen in her red dress limping barefoot across the grounds, one arm raised while crying, her other dangled at an impossible angle, broken and bleeding.

"Help," Carmen faintly screamed. "Don't leave me." The statues on the ground milled around her stumbling form, not sensing a threat, fangless without a wand.

"Turn around," Hermione shouted to Draco.

Understanding her intent, he gripped her waist tighter, keeping her in place. "No."

"She needs us!" Hermione tried to turn the broom back herself, but she'd never been adept at flying. It did nothing but make their trajectory wobble a moment before he banked a sharp right around the hippogriff.

No matter how much she begged, Draco ignored her.

The second ward hole shimmered in the night right in front of her.

The dragon nipped at their heels, striking them on their backs again with its pebbled roar. Draco bent forward, protecting her, causing the broom to fly at a breakneck speed she'd

never experienced.

Hermione screamed just as they zipped right through the shimmer, leaving everything behind.

The statues paused at the ripple of the ward hole, giving roars and screeches of frustration, unable to go any further. Without a target, they flapped their wings in lost confusion, waiting for their master's orders.

Heart lurching in distress, she risked glancing back before turning forward again. She couldn't bear to see Carmen's terror. Hear the faint frantic cries for help that would never come. The crushing lost hope of escape. The slow squeezing of the fist on a soul— a living death.

"I'm sorry," she whispered under her breath. "I'm so sorry."

The flips and turns. The lightning-fast flight. Carmen's desperate screams. It all rolled together, her brain dizzy from movement. Hermione bent over, almost retching on the ground for the second time that night from the ordeal, gasping in breaths to stop the upheaval inside her.

Draco slowed to a reasonable speed while she recovered.

Where was George, and why was Carmen off the broom with a broken arm? She refused to voice the questions, because no answer existed which comforted her. Something terrible must have happened.

Her thoughts pieced together slowly. Fury exploded through her fear. "We could have saved her! This broom is capable to carry up to—"

"I never signed on for that risk," Draco said, picking up the pace. "I'm not endangering you for anyone else."

"How could you be so callous? That could have been me running. She's the same as me—"

"She's *not* you!" he seethed, unyielding like the statues behind her. "That's what Nott wanted. Just a second of letting your guard down. A bad decision. We were already running out of time. Nott managed to make it to the statues. Where do you think he was heading next?"

She already knew— the master bedroom. Once there, Titus could control the wards in a more precise way. Even without magic, the house tied to him there like a second skin through blood magic.

Titus wouldn't have harmed her, of course, but he'd have ordered Draco's death. Hermione imagined him falling away from the broom in pieces like Carmen's master. Skin ripped away as if he'd taken off his clothes, leaving her alone and helpless to watch him die.

Draco zoomed further along the fields. No one came after them. The aurors were either bound or dead, and Titus' magic remained hobbled. Reinforcements had most certainly arrived, but they had time.

Fields appeared and disappeared. Hermione did nothing but clutch the broom, the panic in her chest rising, coming out in short sobs and gasps. She tried to control it, but it felt like the dam in her soul had finally breached.

“You don’t understand,” she tried to explain in between panicked gasps. “Carmen trusted me. I *promised* I’d kill her if something went wrong. That’s how badly she wanted freedom. The worst thing I could have ever done is leave her behind. It’s all my fault. She’d never have gone along with it if I hadn’t. I—I failed her.”

“Stop blaming yourself.” Draco pulled to a stop once they’d traversed past the redirection charms. After that demarcation, it would be nearly impossible to track any apparition, since it didn’t fall under any property or magical boundaries. “I think we’re far enough out for it to work.”

They should have made the unpleasant jump to the safehouse, but Draco only stared into the dark horizon in concentration. He twirled his wrists. Dark ropes of shadow twisted around and around his hand. Over thirty, at least.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Calling them toward me.”

Over the ridge, near a copse of trees, dark entities floated toward them, their tattered robes fluttering in the wind, only barely visible in the dark.

Draco chanted under his breath in what she thought might be an older form of English—though nothing she’d heard before. It caught like knives in her ears. The corners of his mouth dripped with blood, as if the words sliced his tongue.

When the Dementors neared, all hope drained away, replaced by despair. An immense sadness overtook her, the sensation of wanting to lay down and die, reliving every bad thing that had ever happened to her. The air chilled so much that she saw her breath curling in the air.

She didn’t remember how to defeat a Dementor. Was it a patronus? Good thoughts? It jumbled in her mind, along with the blood-drenched memories.

Draco waited for the entire horde to arrive and converge, immune to the atmosphere.

One of the figures reached out a spindly hand, nearly snagging in her hair.

“Don’t fucking touch her.” Draco tugged back with a snarl, their broom lurching away. “I’ve told you that she’s off limits.”

The Dementor listened. However, it seemed as if Draco didn’t control the monsters as easily as the inferi. By their low snarls, they looked as if they hoped he’d loosen the leashes just enough so they could turn on him.

“What are your orders?” The words grated like stone on stone. She’d never known Dementors could speak, and she wished she’d never discovered it.

“I can’t kill within the wards.” Draco pointed to the manor. “But your kind are bound by no such rules. I order you to attack Nott manor. Feast on the men you find. Eat your fill.”

They almost disobeyed, but Draco roughly tugged on the leashes, keeping them in order. Giving one last sickening growl, they floated away, completing their new master’s bidding. The chill vanished, and with it, her thoughts cleared enough to gasp.

“You can’t send the Dementors to Nott Manor.”

“I just did.”

“We didn’t agree to this. There are innocent people there. Luna’s trapped and Katie—”

“Didn’t you hear me? I ordered them to target the men.”

“But your father is there.” No matter what Draco said, he’d regret committing patricide.

He gave a sharp laugh. “My father is harder to kill than that.”

Draco had struggled to control the Dementors, even within range. They weren’t inferi. They were sentient dark creatures. They’d probably kill indiscriminately despite his orders to target the men.

She thought of the guests bound and unable to fight back, and it caused her to realize something horrible. “Carmen’s close to the ward hole! They’ll encounter her first.”

“They won’t Kiss her.” Draco drummed his fingers on her waist, showing his discomfort with her worry. “Nott’s already called reinforcements. I know it. They’ll focus on the aurors.”

It sounded like a lie to comfort her.

The truth: Carmen might get the Kiss, and she had no way to prevent it.

Hermione should have killed her when she had the chance. But could she really have completed the act like she’d promised? The only people she’d ever killed had been in self-defense. An Avada only worked if she meant it, and she didn’t want Carmen to die. Not truly. She’d wanted to save her.

*And she’d failed.*

Hermione clutched her mouth to withhold a scream as they popped out of existence.

---

Before she could process anything, they landed in an abandoned Order safe house, right in the center of chaos.

Hermione stood in a trance, examining the room.

An unconscious person had been laid out on the floor. George, she realised, after seeing a glimpse of his bright red hair. Several people hovered around him, including Fred, as Theo

attempted basic healing spells.

Abigail sat in an opposite corner, sweaty and crying, clutching her stomach. The woman with purple hair held her hand, whispering something soothing she couldn't hear over the cacophony. Ginny and the rescued woman in a green dress were propped into a sitting position against the wall beside the five rescued muggleborns. They were all awake, but still in shock, tears dripping down cheeks, whimpering, just waiting for the potion to completely dissipate.

Including Abigail, the Order had managed to successfully rescue six muggleborns in all— a greater amount than had ever been accomplished before. A crushing blow to the purebloods because of their rarity.

The manhunt for the group would be intense, and the backlash brutal, but they could go nowhere tonight while exhausted and shocked.

She snagged a frantic Harry's arm as he passed. "What happened?"

"George's broom malfunctioned. They fell out of the sky, and both of them were injured. We grabbed George, but we couldn't hold any more weight. Fred and Ron only had old Cleansweeps, which barely functioned with two people. We told the girl that you wouldn't leave—" he trailed off, realizing he'd calculated wrong. "Merlin, you didn't pick her up, did you?"

Hermione struggled to answer through the intense guilt, shaking her head. "We— we couldn't."

Harry grimaced and gave a solemn nod. "Don't worry. They won't harm her. We'll find a way to save her another time."

He patted her shoulder in comfort and left to help George. Hermione didn't have the heart to tell him that even if she didn't suffer the Dementor's Kiss, Carmen was in grave danger. Titus would enter her mind during interrogation and discover her part in the plan, and then he might find out about her aborted pregnancies. Who knew what he'd do to her?

Even with all the people she saved, she still had failed. Blood stained her hands in a way it hadn't before.

Her mind buzzed with latent fear, fragile and numb. What could she do? Who could she help? She wanted to do something, keep busy, so that she didn't have to think. But she'd never been proficient at healing spells, and she'd only get in the way.

Draco must have sensed how near she walked toward the edge of her sanity, because he grabbed her hand. "Let's get out of the main room."

She didn't fight him as he tugged her along. Draco found an empty room, only half dug out in the old tunnels.

"We left her behind," she whispered again.



“We had no choice.”

“You sent Dementors to kill innocent people.”

“For the last time, I sent them to kill the aurors. I’m certain they’ve already arrived.” Draco sighed and stretched his neck side to side, uncomfortable with the questioning. “I only did this because there were too many aurors on the property. You know this. We’d have never gotten out. I needed a way to lure them away, and I’d hoped to use the Dementors as an offensive attack after the escape to keep them busy.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “But I didn’t mean for your friend to be in their path. If I’d known of your promise, I’d have tried to fulfill it when I’d had the chance.”

Hermione flinched at the prospect. She’d never have agreed to his insane plan, even if it made logistical sense, because of the dark magic involved, which is why he never presented her with it.

She understood Draco. Killing the aurors didn’t bother her, but Draco’s soul could only stand so much mutilation. And Carmen and the others...

She searched the room to find something to collapse on to sort through her complicated emotions. A broken chair rested in the corner, so covered in dust she couldn’t discern the color of the fabric. Three old leather-bound books perched on top of it, too mouldy and disintegrated to read.

She took one step toward it, and then the sight of the leather caused her to remember something important.

“Oh fuck.” She stumbled with vertigo, almost falling, and Draco caught her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Hermione grabbed her wrist with the leather bracelet still wrapped around it, disillusioned for the night.

“No,” she tried to tug it off, even knowing it wouldn’t work. “No, no, no.”

It didn’t provide a heavy weight like the shackles, and she’d grown so used to it wrapped around her wrist that she’d forgotten in the adrenaline haze of escape.

“What’s wrong?”

She wanted to punish herself. Hurt herself for the stupidity.

“I accidentally left it on— the bracelet.” For the third time that night, she almost leaned over and vomited, though she didn’t think anything else could be purged from her. “I can’t get it off without his touch.”

Her panic rose inside. Her vision went fuzzy. She tugged and tugged, giving a low scream and dry sobbed until Draco grabbed her.

“Stop, Hermione.” He held her face in her hands as she worked on controlling her breathing. “It only tracks your heart rate. He can’t find you with it.”

“I don’t want anything from him.”

“I know.”

Hermione loathed still having it on her wrist, something that bound her to him, but in the end, Draco was right: it did nothing but alert Titus to her heart rate and any mortal peril. Practically useless without the necklace paired with it.

“We’ll get the bracelet off one day, I promise. But for now, you need to stop panicking, because the cords must be severed, and I require your help.”

“Cords?”

Draco held up his wrist still tangled with the dark shadow leashes. “The aurors are probably still fighting the Dementors, but I can’t hold onto them for too much longer. They require all my energy to control. If they manage to capture one, they could trace me.”

“What do I do?”

“I just need you to be my anchor. Pull me back to myself. I’m going to warn you that I’ll be in great pain, and I might not seem like myself, but you can’t stop me.”

She understood the gravity, but she still hated the situation. “I’ll do it.”

Draco held out his wrist, the dark leashes now visible. “Are you ready?”

“I’m not sure.”

He didn’t give her a chance to overthink it. Looping his finger under a band, he tugged back as if plucking a taut string, snapping it with a shower of green sparks. Draco grit his teeth, still stained with blood from his earlier tongue-slicing chants.

Over and over, he snapped the cords, only taking breaks to lean forward in transparent agony. Blood leaked out of his mouth, his nose, his eyes. Crimson droplets dripped down his face like tears. He gasped in agonized breaths, and Hermione didn’t know what to do to help. When he finally snapped the last band, he collapsed to his knees.

Hermione crouched to check on him.

“Draco, are you—”

Black pits stared back at her, replacing the crimson, the white sclera completely engulfed. He grinned at her, showcasing his sharper canines, streaks of blood still dripping out of the corner of his eyes and mouth.

Hermione scrambled backward, trying to escape him, and he tilted his head as if intrigued. Nothing of Draco seemed to be left in his expression, empty of life. A predator, looking for a

victim to consume.

*Pull me back to myself.*

But how could she do that? She didn't know anything about death or soul magic.

He crawled toward her, grabbing her ankle to shove her under him, the bare sections of her skin scraping against the hard ground.

On instinct, she leaned up and kissed him, tasting the coppery tang of his blood.

He groaned, starved, melting into her.

She tried to reach up to touch his cheek, but he grasped her wrist in a hard hold and slammed it on the ground. When she attempted to move, he snarled in her face, warring with violence and bloodlust simmering under the surface.

"Draco", she whispered slowly. "It's just me." She slowly opened her thighs, pulling up the wispy skirt of her dress with her free hand until it pooled around her waist. Eyes still black, leaning his face down into her neck, he rested his canines near her collarbone. "Come back to me."

"Why would I want to do that?" He mocked in a cruel voice.

She took the hand that grasped her hip and led it to the middle of her thighs where she desired him, shoving her silk knickers to the side, welcoming every stroke of his rough fingers. "Because you need to show me that I'm yours."

Even dark creatures fell to lust, whether blood or flesh. Shoving away the rest of the clothes in his way, he entered her roughly, reclaiming her like they both desired.

This wasn't lovemaking. It was an expression of pain and heartache. Brutal loss and grief, as if the only reprieve they'd ever find was deep inside each other. A desperate attempt to merge their souls.

He kept his teeth at her throat, brushing the sharp points along her neck, aware enough to resist the temptation of biting.

He didn't allow her to change positions, holding her hips steady until her mind drowned in sensation. Meeting his thrusts, her own blunt teeth nipped at his throat, as if begging for reciprocation in her blind lust. It was all too overwhelming, adrenaline still pumping through her veins, allowing her mind to sink into the respite of pleasure. Nothing else existed but them.

She didn't want to finish and return to reality, squeezing her thighs to stop the wave, but it was useless. She climaxed as violently as their sex, arching her back with a cry, and he followed soon after, whispering promises to her in the dead language that cut his tongue.

Draco pulled his mouth from her throat, resting his forehead on her clavicle, shivering to gain control. The dark magic on his wrists writhed until it calmed. When he lifted his head, his

black eyes slowly transformed back into crimson, and after a hard blink, they shifted again to the pale grey she loved so much. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” She craved the rough touch. Needed it.

“Are you really here, or is my mind tormenting me?”

“I’m here.”

They stayed still for a long time as Draco shed the hold of dark magic, and her mind reeled with the impossibility of her new freedom, something she’d never thought she could taste again.

As if considering something, Draco lifted the wrist he’d previously held down, which contained the invisible bracelet, giving a gentle kiss to her palm. “Do you think he can sense what we just did?”

“Possibly.” Most likely, her mind corrected.

A slow, satisfied grin curled Draco’s lips. “I hope Nott’s haunted by every fucking heartbeat.”

---

They woke early in the morning. Hermione mended and transfigured her clothes into trousers and a shirt— simple enough to travel, freshening herself with cleansing charms.

The group gathered in the main tunnel, sipping at water and chewing on slices of stale bread, until they were ready to go. Most of the women they saved seemed shaky and confused still, though they accepted the pathetic breakfast with thanks. Only Abigail looked energized, as if returning to herself.

No one spoke or introduced themselves as they traversed the old tunnels for miles, stopping only to crawl up a ladder into the blinding sun, appearing in a vegetable garden in a country home on the outskirts of a city.

After eating their fill of stolen fruit and vegetables, they apparated into an obscure floo office in Dover. It had once been a government building of some sort, but she didn’t see any clues as to which type. An old man with a limp and a missing eye met them.

“There are more of you here than I agreed to. I’ve already reached my limit.” He leaned on a cane and spat on the ground, and Hermione wondered if the man could even see at all with the way a milky film covered his good eye.

“That’s not true,” Harry responded. “We gave you what you asked for. We even managed an illicit trip to Gringotts to empty my father’s coffers for this. All of my inheritance.”

“Did you?” The man grinned, and his eye moved in a disconcerting way. “Unfortunately, my prices have been raised overnight. Inflation. You understand. There’s a bounty out now for

some escaped muggleborns and the dangerous convicts who stole them. They're offering a fortune for all of them... but especially for one named *Hermione*."

Even though it looked as if he couldn't see, his milky eye landed on her, as if he knew exactly who she was.

"We don't have muggleborns," Harry lied.

"Ah, but you're still criminals. Perhaps it's worth my time to turn you in to authorities. And if you think you can kill me for the threat, just know I've charmed the floo to shut down if you do. You don't have any choice. At this moment in time, I'm one of the only ferriers who would dare smuggle people out of Great Britain."

"What do you want?" Harry asked.

"Money. More of it. At least, more than the authorities are offering."

"But we don't have—"

Draco stopped Harry with a tap to his shoulder. "Let me handle this."

Harry backed down, and Draco walked toward the old man with one hand clutching his wand, his other flexed, the veins writhing.

The man opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Draco clasped him by the throat, nearly shoving him to his knees. The old man choked, clawing at the hand strangling him.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked. "We can't kill him."

"Oh, I'm not going waste my magic killing him." Draco yanked the man around, uncaring if he hurt him, dragging him to a side door of what looked like a private office. He opened it and threw the man inside. "I'm merely negotiating."

Draco slammed the door behind them, the window rattling with the force.

---

Minutes later, Draco walked back out again, rubbing his hands on his cloak in disgust, as if to cleanse himself of germs. There had been no screams. No blood. But when the old man emerged, free of injuries, pale-faced and shivering, he wobbled to the fireplace and turned it on, handing out floo powder.

"How did you convince him?" she asked.

"Weak men don't require finesse. Their threats are all bluff, and they break with the least amount of pressure. It's important when meeting people to quickly suss out which men not to underestimate and which men to shove aside."

"You're a bit scary." George limped next to his twin with a patched up broken leg and two black eyes. A cloth wrapped around his head covered an injury that could have been much

worse, made less so by Theo's healing skills. "Scary but effective. I think we'll get along just fine as long as you can take a joke."

Both the twins grabbed their handfuls of floo powder. Hermione watched as the entire group vanished into the green flames, one by one. When they were the only people left in the room, Draco pointed a finger at the old man who trembled. "Remember what we discussed. I'd be highly annoyed to have to contact my aunt."

"I won't say a word."

Draco grabbed a handful of floo powder and tugged Hermione close before stepping through the flames, exiting Great Britain.

---

They arrived in a rundown nondescript building. It didn't seem as if anyone had been inside it for years before their ragtag group of Order members, muggleborns, and assorted purebloods.

"Your aunt?" Hermione asked, confused. "But you're not in contact with her?"

"He doesn't know that." Draco sneered again at the filth, keeping her close by his side.

"Where are we?" one of the muggleborns asked.

"Romania," Harry answered.

"Why Romania?"

"Our Bristol tunnels are compromised, and the others couldn't be trusted for a reliable training facility. Romania is notorious for restricting travelers, but one of our members offered them something they've wanted for a long time. In return, they granted us shelter. The other members from our tunnel have already relocated long ago."

"So where are we going to stay?" Abigail asked in a soft voice.

"Charlie Weasley's new dragon reserve."

---

They travelled by broom. The wind was cooler than in Britain as they flew across the southern Carpathian Mountains over thick forest. The air was thin and deprived of moisture, hurting her lungs as she breathed.

Their destination was so remote that they still had hours to travel after leaving the floo. She spent the empty time on the broom watching the thick verdant treetops pass by, punctuated only by icy glacial pools that looked inaccessible by foot.

Over the course of the flight, Draco explained that the Romanian government had a breeding program of Hungarian horntails and several other species, wishing to export dragon eggs, but their past trainer had been eaten. For years, they'd tempted Charlie with offers to set up a training camp in their old forests.

Very few dragon tamers lived, and of them, Charlie was the best. Over the years, multiple governments offered him positions in their own dragon reserves, but he'd always turned them down— until now.

Hours into the flight, Hermione spied a large open clearing, dotted with tents, fences, and ancient wooden buildings. Several large dragons flew around the encampment and smaller ones perched on treetops. Their roars echoed along the mountain range beside them as they neared, but none of the creatures attacked or blew fire.

Their group landed at the outskirts of the small village. They collectively groaned, grateful to be let off to stretch their legs.

A great hall stood before them, built in an old style, showing the dragon reserve must have been here for generations.

Charlie wasn't there to greet them. In his place was an older wizard. He wore old-fashioned, moth-eaten robes. His gnarled beard reached his stomach, and an outdated pointed hat perched on his head.

Harry walked forward first, holding out his hand to shake as they greeted each other warmly, showing they knew each other. When they had finished, the old man turned his attention to the group.

"Welcome to Romania," the strange wizard said, arms outstretched. "We have tents and food ready. I'm sure you must be exhausted."

His eyes picked over the waiting crowd, landing finally on Draco. He held his stare for an uncomfortable fraction too long.

"Draco Malfoy," he finally drawled in a cool tone. "You look like your grandfather, Abraxas, but I see a great deal of your mother in you too."

Sensing a threat, Draco shoved Hermione behind him for protection, wand out in warning, though he kept his dark magic markers hidden.

She peeked over his shoulder and raised her wrists, feeling uneasy.

"Ah, and you must be Hermione Granger." The old wizard gave a nod in her direction. "I've heard so much about you.... although I'm curious what's true and what's false. Out of everyone, I understand that our reputation can precede us."

"And who are you?" she snapped.

But she didn't need the answer. Her brain dredged up the sudden recognition with startling clarity.

She'd studied the wizened face in a pensieve several times in her life, watching the legendary battle with the Dark Lord, using curving whips of magic, powerful and electrifying even through a memory.

A ghost stood before her, the monster of her childhood stories, the architect of the mist caging them. The sole reason she'd been kidnapped as a child, raised as a lamb to the slaughter for the continuation of the purebloods' line.

The old wizard's eyes twinkled with mirth.

“My name is Albus Dumbledore.”

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Graphic depictions of violence. Death (not a main character).

The music video of "Day by Day" (song suggestion) long ago inspired parts of this chapter. XOXO



# Chapter 56: From the Ashes

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestions:

The Prince of Egypt Soundtrack- “The Burning Bush”

Karliene- “Become the Beast”

Olivia Rodrigo- “Can’t Catch Me Now”

Thank you: A big thank you to my wonderful alpha team and my beta, MyPrivateInsanity for their eagle eyes!

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

### Previously on House Pet:

After freeing several muggleborns and escaping Nott Manor on Beltane night, Draco and Hermione travelled to Romania to take sanctuary in Charlie Weasley’s new dragon sanctuary, where they were greeted by the infamous dead wizard, Albus Dumbledore.

### From the Ashes

Draco reacted first by grabbing Harry by the collar and shoving his wand under his chin. “You’re going to need a good explanation for not warning me about this.”

Harry held up both hands in surrender. “Whoa, hold on—”

“Lower your wand,” Dumbledore said in a calm tone. “There is no need for violence. I can provide the explanations you’re seeking. However, if you refuse to do so, I will intervene.”

Hermione shook off her shock, replacing it with boiling hatred. How dare he ask any of them to lower their wands!

Dumbledore had been the impetus behind every violent lash of pain in her life—and not just of hers. He was the catalyst of suffering on a scale impossible to comprehend: dark years of bloody chaos; muggles in the camps worked to death; women sentenced to prostitution; executions broadcast to the public; the exploitation of her friends. The purebloods might have capitalized on the chaos to take control, but Dumbledore had smoothed the path, and she wouldn’t forgive him for it.

If he attempted any justifications, it would be while bound and at her feet.

“Incarcerous!”

A flash of colour, and her spell dissolved into nothing.

With a simple twitch of Dumbledore’s fingers, her arms and legs snapped to her sides, feet lifting off the ground, floating her toward him.

The muggleborns cried out in terror, but the Order members remained calm and didn’t interfere, causing her to reevaluate the situation.

“Put her down,” Draco demanded, this time leveling his wand in Dumbledore’s direction, for once seeming uneasy.

Just as easily as he’d trapped her, he petrified Draco.

The power of the nonverbal, wandless magic shocked her as she landed in front of Dumbledore, hands still stuck at her side. She’d never experienced anything like it, her own abilities a mere shadow in comparison. He’d dissipated her spell as if it had been mere mist.

Dumbledore studied her similarly to how Dolohov had, except without the sharp edges of cruelty. “I’ve waited a long time to meet you.”

Despite the legends, Dumbledore appeared as any other ordinary wizard. Nothing stood out to her as a beacon of his capabilities, other than a calmness to his presence.

A stomach-turning possibility struck her— what if everything they’d told her about him had been a lie?

Titus had manipulated the truth several times before. What if Dumbledore had never been the villain of her bedtime stories? He would provide a convenient scapegoat for the Death Eaters: a supposedly dead man— their greatest enemy—unable to defend his name.

She suspected the truth might reside somewhere in the middle. No matter the conclusion, she blamed him for many things, and her fury still rested on a jagged edge. “Why would you care to meet me?”

“That will be a private discussion between us.”

“I’d *never* meet you in private.”

Dumbledore unfurled the arm at his side, and she flinched at the sight of his shriveled hand. The burned appearance covered the entire appendage, the full extent of the old wound disappearing under the voluminous arm of his old-fashioned robes.

“You will. I’m sure of it.”

“How so?”

“Because you desire a truth only I can provide.”

She found that hard to deny. “What do you know about me?”

“That’s something we will discuss in private as well.”

The evasion irritated her, magic prickling under her bound hands. “What do you want from me?”

“You are exhausted. Now is not the time for questions or decisions. Eat and rest first. If you decide you want the answers you seek, then you— and only you— may meet me at my tent tomorrow before sunset.”

Only her? The thought caused her wariness to increase.

“I don’t—”

“Welcome to Romania.” He gave a short bow of his head and abruptly apparated away, an obvious refusal to entertain any other questions, leaving her to wonder if she’d imagined him.

Behind her, the wandless petrificus totalus sloughed away on Draco, and he grabbed Harry again, pulling him close. “We’re going to have a nice long chat soon, and you’re going to tell me everything you know.”

“I don’t know much of anything. Sirius does though, and he trusts him, so that means that I trust him too and so should you.”

“That will be for me to decide.” Draco shoved Harry away. “I don’t give my trust blindly.”

A dragon’s roar interrupted them. The large beast circled overhead, gliding down to land near them with a heavy thud, bringing with it the scent of sulphur. She recognized Etelka by her glistening black scales, and she recognized her rider by his bright red hair.

Charlie Weasley slid off with a wink. “Hello, dove.”

---

Charlie greeted his brothers first with rough hugs. He forced George to take off his hat, inspecting his wound. “Who healed this?”

“I did,” Theo answered, though he hid behind Hermione. The older Weasley siblings had always intimidated him.

“Brilliant job! Much better than the patchy spells anyone here can do.” Charlie then turned his attention to his little sister, and he heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank fuck they found you.”

When he neared to embrace her, she flinched away, causing him to step back in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

The twins glanced at each other. Ron poked Theo in his shoulder, mouth in a thin line. “You tell him what you discovered.”

“Why me?”

“You’re the healer.”

“Right...” Theo cleared his throat. “Well, last night I assessed her brain, going through each structure. The worst damage occurred in her temporal lobe, mostly in her hippocampus.”

“Dumb it down,” Harry reminded.

By Theo’s reluctance, she knew he’d provide unwelcome news. “Rosier extracted several integral memories, erasing large sections of her childhood, and I discovered he’d scrambled, replaced, or destroyed most of them involving *you*. He didn’t bother being gentle, leaving shreds of thoughts behind.”

Charlie touched his chest in confusion. “Are you saying she doesn’t remember anything about me?”

“Only barely.”

Charlie stumbled back, and Fred reached out to steady him. The dragon behind him rumbled, stomach glowing with suppressed fire. She snapped her jagged teeth in agitation, swaying her giant head, as if experiencing his terrible emotions through the link.

“Is there any way to reverse it?”

“I’m sorry,” Theo whispered. “I don’t know. I’m not an expert in mind healing. You’d need a specialist. She can form new memories, I think, but... the damage might be permanent.”

“Fly away Etelka. I don’t— I can’t—”

The beast obeyed, launching into the sky, giving an ear-piercing roar, which her brethren returned in the distance. Dragon fire rumbled out, painting the sky with leaping flames, the residual heat sizzling against her skin.

“Tell me that you killed him.” Charlie’s voice was darker than she’d ever heard.

“We were forced to leave him alive,” Ron said, red-faced. “But we will. I vow it.”

“Did he hurt her in... other ways?”

“Yes.”

Charlie pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes with a low groan. Lowering his hands and opening his eyes, he first looked at each of his brothers in horror, and then back to Ginny, who attempted to melt into Ron’s side.

Charlie shook his head, eyes now red with unshed tears. “You don’t remember me, Gin, but I remember nearly every second of your life.” He held out his hand to her. “Let me show you the camp, and we can get to know each other again. By the end of the night, I’ll be your favorite brother again. No contest.”

“Impossible,” Fred said. “We’ve always held that title.”

“Don’t believe their lies.” Charlie gave a sad wink. “Everyone knows you’ve always liked me best.”

Theo told her once that Ginny had always been as fierce and brave as her brothers. The trembling woman near them seemed the antithesis of that, a shadow of herself. Yet still, a spark remained, shown when she grabbed Charlie’s outstretched hand.

The dragon roared again, still circling overhead.

---

Draco and Theo looked out of place as Charlie led their small group around. More than their clothes, it was their demeanour: heads held high, shoulders back, both lacking the ravaged edges of hunger which haunted everyone else.

And she supposed she looked odd too. Even transfigured, the fabric of her clothes cost more galleons than many of the Order members had ever possessed. She remained aware of that fact while viewing her new temporary, meager home— so different from the manor.

Most of the people evacuated from the Bristol tunnels had moved to the dragon reserve. Rebels in training, still without a true home. Nearly all of the people they encountered seemed to be around their age, still young enough that the Order denied them prominent positions or serious missions until they were deemed ready.

Three rectangular halls made up the center of the camp: one for training, one for dining, and the last for schooling. Long, empty tables crowded the mess hall when she peeked inside, reminding her of Hogwarts.

“We take turns cooking and cleaning,” Charlie explained. “Everyone does their part. No exceptions. We have two free elves who volunteered their service to the cause, but most of our food is human made. It’s decent, but less... palatable than you’re accustomed to.”

Hermione quieted her spoiled side, accepting she might grapple with adapting at first, since she’d never had to lift a finger to cook or clean in her life.

They went to a large field of tents next, showing them the makeshift infirmary first. “Our only trained healer needed to stay in Britain, so you’re all we have,” he explained to Theo.

Still dressed in his neon robes, Theo opened the trunks, assessing the inventory of products and potions, seeming disappointed with the supplies available.

“This is a mess. I can’t even read the labels.”

“I’ll help you organize,” Harry volunteered.

Charlie motioned the rest of the group onward, leaving Harry and a complaining Theo behind to work. They entered the small maze of Perkins tents next. She suspected their interiors matched their patched and mended outsides, appearing handed down or scrounged from supply closets, each housing two to five inhabitants comfortably.

The rescued muggleborns paired off, dividing into the last two remaining tents, all of them clearly nervous while choosing their spaces. She suspected they'd collapse into bed, sleeping away their shock, amplified by the odd fear of being free, something they had never experienced.

Abigail gave a shy wave to Hermione as she entered the last tent alongside the muggleborn who'd fainted through the escape.

"I'm tired," Ginny whispered.

"I'm sure you are," Charlie motioned to Ron. "Your tent is next to mine near Etelka's enclosure. You'll be sharing with Padma. Perhaps you should go with her, Ron, and show her all her belongings we've managed to save."

From earlier conversations, she'd discovered Padma was the woman in green saved by Seamus during the escape. Both Padma and Ginny had been captured at the same time, memories taken and altered, forced into the role of a mistress, and they'd both need extensive recovery.

Ron gave a solemn nod, leading Ginny gently away with Fred and George behind. They disappeared out of view, leaving only Draco and Hermione without a tent.

Charlie's shoulders sagged, as if it had taken significant effort to keep his composure around Ginny. The dragon tamer stared at the spot his sister had stood, hands clenching and unclenching rhythmically. "I refuse to accept that she'll never remember me again."

Hermione's heart ached. She had no idea what it would be like if Theo suddenly forgot most of their life together, the horror of it, another form of death.

Draco scoffed before she could respond. "Theo knows nothing. Some memories can still be salvaged."

Charlie twisted in surprise. "What do you mean?"

Draco had stood silently by her side the entire tour, viewing his surroundings with hands clasped behind his back, seeming uncomfortable and out of place, so his interruption had surprised her too.

"Theo might be proficient in healing, but he's not an expert with legilimency," Draco explained. "I'm not a mind healer, so I can't repair damage, but a true master can alter or add their own—a projection. The replacements don't have to be fake either. All I need to do is view yours, and I'll seamlessly plant them in the sections of her brain less damaged."

In her own turmoil, Hermione had forgotten his skill at projection.

"That's... clever." Charlie sounded cautious. "And unexpected, coming from you. It also sounds as if it might be as dangerous and delicate a task as extracting a memory."

"All forms of legilimency carry risks, but I've exceeded both my father and aunt in the skill. I'd have offered this earlier, but I didn't want to give hope to anyone until I brought the

suggestion to you first.”

Memory work reminded her of the doctors in the muggle films, using scalpels to slice through bodies with precision. A slight mistake could result in catastrophe. It needed a steady, experienced hand.

“What do you want in exchange?”

“I assume I must contribute something important for a Malfoy to be tolerated within your ranks.”

“You’re part of the Order—”

“Not officially. My cousin still doesn’t trust me.”

During her stay at Nott Manor, Draco had manipulated Sirius into his schemes, proving he remained every inch his father’s son. As a result, Sirius still didn’t welcome his cousin with open arms.

“Sirius will come around if I do, and I’ll definitely vouch for you if you heal Ginny.”

Knowing Draco, that might have been his plan all along with offering his services.

A true smile replaced Charlie’s grief. Shaking his head once, as if to come back to his senses, he turned to her. “Speaking of Order members, I have a surprise for you, dove.”

“I don’t like surprises,” she said.

“You will this time.”

Draco narrowed his eyes, and then, as if he’d puzzled something out that she hadn’t, he squeezed Hermione’s hand. “I’m going to set up our tent. Meet me when you’re finished.”

---

Charlie brought Hermione to the dragons, showing off the new nesting areas with rows of colorful eggs. Hungarian hornetails and Romanian Longhorns populated the meadows, native to the region, though she spied three Ukrainian Ironbellies and a single Swedish Short-Snout.

“Etelka is the herd leader,” Charlie explained, walking to the adult dragon pens. “Dragons are a matriarchy, but they don’t always have to be blood related. The biggest and strongest female always rules. When we first arrived, it only took her a single day to swoop in and steal her rightful place at the top. The entire herd follows her orders now, which means they follow mine as well.”

They stopped near a pen, and he leaned against the fence, folding his hands together. Etelka had curled into a ball on her side in a meadow, belly to the sun, exposing the golden striations on her lower scales. The other smaller dragons rested in separate pens or perched on trees, but they gave a wide berth to Charlie’s dragon— besides one.

An even larger dragon with a stunning mixture of black and red scales curled up in the meadow behind Etelka. Her teeth protruded from a mouth so large it seemed hard to close. It was the ugliest and meanest dragon she'd ever seen, and she couldn't even place its breed.

"What about that one?" Hermione pointed to the beast. "I thought you said Etelka is the largest."

"That's Etelka's hatchling."

*"Hatchling?"*

"Raised her myself." He thumped his chest with pride. "My girl surprised me one day by flying away, returning with a surprise egg. It was the only time she ever disobeyed me. The sire must have been a brute to dominate her in the mating rituals. Mixing dragon species often makes a sterile hatchling, so it's usually discouraged, but Etelka has refused all other matings." He shrugged, showing it didn't bother him like it would other dragon tamers. "Kinga outgrew her mother several years ago and hasn't stopped."

A group of children— five in total— ran up to the gate of Etelka's pen on the opposite side of them. She recognized them from the classroom Lavender had been teaching inside the Bristol tunnels. The oldest boy unlatched the gate and ran inside.

Horror zipped through her. "Someone needs to stop—"

Charlie grabbed her shoulder before she could bolt in and save them. "Don't fret. Watch—"

The children raced to the sleeping Etelka and climbed up her leg. The big dragon didn't growl or snap her teeth like she did to Hermione. Instead, she acted like an enormous dog, rolling to the side, so the children could climb on her easier. "You see, Etelka loves children."

"And her hatchling?" A single brave girl walked over to Kinga with a book in hand. She snuggled against the curve of the scaled leg, head resting against the belly warmed with fire, and began to read out loud. Kinga cracked one eye, gave a grumble, resembling an annoyed sigh and then went back to sleep.

"She tolerates them."

"Because of her mother?"

"Because dragons have honor. They refuse to hunt the young, even the young of other species."

The hatchling's eyes snapped open again, this time zeroed in on Hermione, displaying her teeth in a sharp warning.

Charlie noticed and laughed. "That rule doesn't apply to you though. She barely tolerates me, and I hand raised her. You'd lose a hand if you attempted to pet her."

She'd lose more than her hand. Hermione couldn't ever imagine trying to pet a dragon. Hermione looked closer at the little girl again, noticing something.



Her heart skipped a beat.

“Is that—”

“The little girl you saved from the camp?” His lips curled in a satisfied grin. “Yes, I was wondering when you’d notice. If you want to know, Caroline’s adjusting fine, though she misses her mum. She stays with the other younger children, many of them orphans or separated from their parents. She loves Kinga the most and reads to her every day.”

Hermione grasped the wooden fence before her for strength. Since that terrible day, she’d reviewed what she could have done differently. Even with the great cost, she decided long ago she wouldn’t have changed a thing. Not when it turned out like this.

Caroline had everything a little girl should: safety, freedom, an education, and a dragon to watch over her. But most importantly, she remained out of the clutches of wizards like the Carrows.

“Was this the surprise?”

“One of them.”

She didn’t think she’d get answers, so she enjoyed watching the dragons and children playing for a long time, until someone called from the side. “Children, it’s time for dinner.”

She recognized the voice before she twisted and then rubbed her eyes, unable to believe what she viewed.

Julie stood next to the far fence, holding a chubby baby on her hip. As if by instinct, her friend turned her head, and their eyes met.

“Hermione!” Julie left her post, racing toward her as fast as holding a baby would allow.

“I thought she was with another group,” Hermione said dumbly, right before taking off into a sprint.

“Surprise,” Charlie said.

---

Their meeting resulted in thirty minutes of tears and hugs. Charlie took over the responsibility of the other children, bringing them to dinner.

“I can’t believe you actually named him after me. I thought you were joking.” Hermione sat on her worn couch, watching Julie’s little boy crawl along the floor of her Perkin’s tent, which she shared with Lavender. He wobbled with every movement, finally reaching his toy, babbling something incoherent. Hermione’s heart melted, wondering how she could love someone she’d just met so much.

“I promised, didn’t I?” Julie dabbed at her eyes as she’d been doing since their first embrace next to the dragon pens.

“I guess it could have been worse,” Hermione teased. “Herman’s a normal enough name. I suppose you could have chosen Hermy.”

Baby Herman clutched his well-loved stuffed dragon, chewing contentedly on the tail. A white strand of hair intermixed with his dark curls, showing he’d inherited the Veela genes from Nera. Even with baby features, he resembled Blaise, though softer. Perhaps a version of what his father might have been in another world, only with Julie’s round eyes and copious amounts of freckles.

“Have you been able to speak to Dean?” Julie asked.

Hermione had been dreading the inevitable question. “He’s dealing with ministry investigations, but he’s doing alright from what I know.”

“Oh,” she whispered, understanding the gravity. “And Katie?”

“She’s... I haven’t managed to speak to her much.” Hermione found it impossible to explain the betrayal.

Julie must sense she’d left out vital information, but she didn’t pry. The missing piece of their coven grew in the silence, until she couldn’t ignore the worst news, grief twisting in her spine. It unburied the fragile part of her that swam to the bottom of the pond, intent on staying there forever.

“Finch—”

“I already know,” Julie whispered, voice catching. “Charlie told me months ago.”

A part of Hermione was relieved she didn’t have to explain; the other part swallowed her renewed pain. Glancing to the side, she curled her fingers into the fabric of her trousers. Her voice shook. “I was there.”

“I know that too. I’m sorry.”

She didn’t want to talk about him. Or any of the absent coven, really. It remained too raw.

“Julie?” A deep voice called from the entrance of the tent, saving her from the uncomfortable conversation. “Can I come in?”

“Just a moment.” Julie scrambled upright, dabbing her eyes again and fixing her hair. “Oh no, do I look okay?”

Her face remained puffy, eyes red from crying.

“You always look pretty.”

Julie finished swiping at her hair when a tall man entered, moving awkwardly, as if unsure of his body. He had messy brown hair with a lopsided grin.

When he realized Julie had company, his cheeks flushed, and he shifted on his feet, holding a crate filled with planting supplies and another bag with tools.

“Hello Neville,” Julie’s voice turned oddly high pitched. “Have you met Hermione?”

“I’ve seen her from a distance, but I’ve never met her.”

Perhaps they’d seen each other at her excursions at Hogwarts, though she didn’t remember.

“Neville…” Hermione said, and then realization hit. “Oh, Neville Longbottom! Theo talked about you.”

“All good things, I hope.”

It sounded like a question, which proved warranted, because most of the things said about him suggested incompetence. She gave a nod to soften the truth.

From what Theo had told her, Neville Longbottom had been a chubby Gryffindor who Snape hated with a passion. He barely passed his classes, besides herbology, always messing up in one way or another.

The description didn’t match the man in front of her. Though she spied the remnants of an awkward child, he’d grown into himself. He possessed broad shoulders with tan and sunburned skin from being outside all day. Dirt lined under his fingernails, as if he’d just finished digging in the soil, and he’d forgotten a twig tangled in his trainers.

“I was just stopping by to check on your plants in the back.” Neville lifted the crate to explain. “To make sure— um— that they’re growing correctly.”

Julie fidgeted with her hands. “I don’t think they’ve changed much since yesterday, but you can look at them again if you wish.”

“I’d like that,” his face softened, and then as if remembering something he shifted again on his feet. “While I’m here, I was also going to offer my help to fix or mend anything.”

“Thank you. I can’t think of anything right now, but I’ll let you know if I do.”

Herman crawled over and grabbed at the man’s shoelaces, about to chew on the forgotten twig. Neville set down his crate and bag and picked the baby up.

“Hello, Mr. Herman,” Neville greeted, tickling his stomach. “You’re getting bigger every day.”

“It’s the vegetables you’ve helped me grow. I mash them up every night for him.”

Neville glowed with warmth. “Do you mind if I take him to check on your garden?”

“He’d love that, but make sure he doesn’t get to the mandrakes. He always tries to pull them up.”

“He’s safe with me.” With one more glance back at Julie, Neville exited with Herman babbling away in his arms.

“So,” Hermione teased, raising an eyebrow. “*Neville Longbottom.*”

“Shut up.” Julie took a pillow and threw it at her, and then leaned her head in her hands and groaned. “Oh, Merlin. Was I that obvious?”

“Yes.”

She groaned again.

Hermione attempted to be merciful. “But so was he.”

“You think he likes me?”

“Are you blind? Of course he does. He offered to look at your *garden.*”

“He does that for everyone. He’s just very kind.”

“That looked like far more than kindness.”

Julie seemed about ready to die of embarrassment. “He did make Herman’s cot.”

“You see.”

Julie played with the frayed ends of a nearby blanket. “It doesn’t matter. There’s nothing that can happen between us.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one, my mum threw his parents in Azkaban, and it’s unclear if she crucioed them first. He was raised by his grandmother.”

“Oh... that does make it awkward I suppose.”

“He doesn’t blame me for it, which might be worse than if he hated me.” She seemed tortured. “He’s just so kind, you see. I’ve never met anyone like him, and he deserves... he deserves someone who isn’t broken.”

Hermione grabbed Julie’s hand to prevent further fidgeting. “Please don’t say that about yourself.”

“But I am,” Julie corrected. “You don’t understand. I tried to— well, there was a time with Seamus long ago. We kissed one night for fun. I’d wanted to do it so badly, but the moment it happened, I panicked. Seamus understood, and I brushed it off at the time. But Neville... Merlin, you’re right. I like him, but I don’t want to mess it up. I’m not sure I can do anything that a normal couple can do, so it’s pointless”

Hermione understood her feelings. There was a time after the Trials that she struggled with the same sentiment, and her trauma was nothing compared to Julie's.

"Was Seamus the only time you attempted to kiss someone?"

"Yes."

"Have you talked to Neville about this? He appears patient and understanding. I think he might surprise you. Maybe you just need someone to make the experience feel safe."

Julie tugged her hand away, and then stared down at her open palms. "I hope you're right, and it had just been too soon." She managed a soft smile. "Because I really like the thought of kissing him."

Hermione stood up abruptly and travelled the meager room, only sectioned off by thin tent walls. She bent beside a small table, inspecting the legs.

"What are you doing?" Julie asked.

Hermione gave the best devious grin that she could conjure, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. "Finding something to break, so Neville Longbottom can come *fix* it."

Julie threw another pillow at her.

---

The Malfoy Perkins tent stood out from the rest, crafted of fine silver fabric woven from Himalayan ice spider thread, sturdy and strong.

The interior proved extravagant. Lush fabrics. Crystal chandeliers. Five rooms, including a potions lab and a fully functioning bathroom and kitchen, which sourced the water from the air and vanished the waste.

"It's lovely," she admitted. And far nicer than any of the others.

"I may be a refugee," Draco said. "But a Malfoy could never be a true peasant."

She laughed at the pretentious statement. Since the first day she'd met him, he'd been a bit of a spoiled arse, and she didn't think living in a dragon sanctuary would change that.

"Mipsy refused to leave the manor behind," Draco explained. "She didn't trust the peacocks not to destroy the gardens, and I don't blame her, especially since they've elected your cat as their new leader, and as a team, they are a menace to the wildlife."

"You left Crooks?"

"As if I could ever tell that demon what to do." Draco shrugged. "He wished to stay, and I value my life, so I'm not worried about the beast. He'll show up somehow if you need him."

She didn't doubt that.

Draco saved the best room for last. He held her eyes closed, not allowing her to open them until he brought her fully inside.

Wall to wall books. Draco had magically altered the room to hold the rows of oak bookcases from the manor. Three magically charmed leaded glass panes brought in sunlight, along with strategically placed fairy orbs.

Hermione drifted among the stacks, nearly buzzing with excitement. “It’s as if you took along the entire Malfoy library.”

She’d lived over half a year without easy access to a true library. Titus had supplied her with stacks of books, but nothing with any true substance.

“Most of them are the darker tomes— just in case we need them.”

She appreciated the forethought, recognizing many of the titles as she passed. Setting her extendable purse on a study table in the center, she extracted her friends’ wands. She set aside Dean’s for safekeeping, intending to return it one day, but she held Finch’s to her chest, remembering his surprised excitement when the sparks first erupted.

After several deep breaths, she set it down and took out three of Finch’s terrariums she’d stashed away several days ago in preparation for her escape— the only ones with living insects still inside them. They weren’t essential, but she couldn’t leave them behind.

Her father’s papers exited next.

“Do you want time alone to read them?” Draco asked.

“Not today.” Her curiosity tugged at her, but she set them aside for a time so her brain could absorb the information better.

The skin-bound book appeared last. It pulsed as normal, sticking like glue to her blood, a snake constricting around its prey.

“Give that to me,” he said.

She handed it over, and he placed it on a special shelf, warded for the darkest arts. “Don’t touch it again. Some books can attach to a person and manipulate them to use it.”

Hermione took the warning to heart. “I have something for you.”

Draco raised his eyebrow as she pulled out the vials she’d collected from Titus’ drawer. One dark ingredient and rare potion after the other.

His eyes flashed red, showing his appreciation. “Do you have anything else in your bag?”

“No... why?”

He stalked toward her, grabbed her, and slung her over his shoulder. “Because I think it’s time we took a break.”

He brought her into the master bedroom, which matched his room back in Malfoy manor, and threw her in the mountains of soft bedding. She sank into it after a soft bounce. Mouths attached in a kiss, one hand running up under her shirt, the other buried in her curls.

---

Hermione drifted in the dark. A heavenly sensation overtook her. Pressure on her thighs, fingers dimpling into her soft skin.

“Open for me, my love.”

She did as the voice asked, whimpering with the phantom strokes, a bare whisper of pleasure, refusing to press where she ached. She tried to twist toward the fingers, though the heavy hands kept her in place.

A mouth touched near her knee, trailing closer.

“Draco,” she groaned.

A gentle bite to her soft skin, and the lips pulled away. “He’s not who you dream about.”

Titus grinned at her from between her spread thighs. He pressed a kiss close to her knickers, blue eyes almost glowing with mirth. “Say *my name* sweetly, and I’ll finally put my tongue where you want it.”

She tried to move away, but her body felt heavy, hands glued to her side. She tried to shout, but her voice felt stuck inside her throat.

His grin turned cruel. “Your days might be his, but your dreams are mine.”

The apparition vanished and she awoke, finding that she’d twisted all the way off the bed.

“What’s wrong?” Draco sat up. The blanket fell away, exposing his naked chest, showing he hadn’t bothered dressing after their interlude earlier.

Hermione crawled to the corner and placed her head in her hands, curling her knees to her chest. “Just a nightmare.”

A real one. Her thighs still tingled from pressure. She feared touching the tender spots, worried she’d feel wetness left by his mouth on her.

Placing her hand on her heart, she attempted to expunge the terrible emotions wanting to eat her whole.

“It was just a dream,” Draco whispered, rolling off the bed and dragging her into his hold.

“No... it was him.” She’d never explained the specifics of her last days at the manor. Neither of them had broached the subject, and the complications of it tortured her.

“You’re free,” he whispered into her hair.

Was she? Hermione glanced down at the leather bracelet, now visible. As she stared, a horrible thought occurred.

The bracelet tracked her heart rate and mortal peril, but what if the connection allowed more than that? Could Titus have discovered a way to manipulate the link and alter her dreams? The touch had felt far too real.

Hermione wouldn't put it past him, though she didn't have proof. "That last night," she began. "At the manor—"

"You don't have to tell me."

Draco followed her line of sight toward the bracelet, and he furrowed his brow.

"I do."

"You don't."

"He made me— well, he was going to arrest you."

Draco's hold tightened on her. He didn't pull back to look at her and she was glad, not knowing if she could continue if she had to look him in the eye.

"Did he touch you?" his voice was low, finger digging into her back. Black veins crawled all the way up to his elbow.

"It was a shadow. A shade. Blood magic to mimic. Nothing true."

"Did he force you to undress?"

"I stayed in my bathing costume."

Draco understood without her having to explain more. He let her go, stood up, and began to pace. The black veins seemed more pronounced with only a sliver of moonlight to highlight them. "The thought of him—"

"If you blame me, I understand—"

"Stop talking." His head snapped toward her, red eyes blazing. "You think I blame you for anything he put you through?" He stalked closer again, tugging her up and placing her on the bed again. "Do you think the dreams were projected through the link of the bracelet?"

He'd arrived at the same conclusion she had. "Is that possible?"

He fixated on her bracelet again with a sneer. "It's... possible. How vivid were the dreams?"

"Extremely vivid."

"I'll find a way to stop them."



If true, Titus wanted to claim her psyche, punish her for leaving him, but she controlled how she responded. The link travelled both ways. Draco had promised to replace every touch with his own, and she included the phantom touches to the tally.

Still aching from the dream, Hermione spread her thighs, hoping to torture Titus' conscious thoughts just as he tried to torture her subconscious. "I need you."

Draco understood her proposition, eyes flashing red, kissing slowly down her body, until his tongue finally reached exactly where she wanted it.

---

Much later in the night, both sweaty and sated, Draco untangled them. She groaned and reached for him again, but he only went to a chest at the foot of the bed, removing a familiar stuffed animal.

He handed Hopper to her. "I tried to send it to you months ago, but Nott denied it."

She grabbed her old lovey and pulled it close while Draco reentered the bed. "Do you want me to project your old memories?"

"Yes."

Draco did his best to be gentle with the memory modification, but the disorientation of the ensuing process made her feel as if she stood on a rocking ship.

When finished, he kissed her temple. "I can't believe you're here. Maybe I'm the one dreaming."

Her mind felt whole again, eliminating the mild confusion she'd swum in since he'd extracted them. She remembered faces from the tunnels, complete conversations—everything.

"I think a part of me feels like I'm still in the dungeon."

"You're free," he whispered again.

Not yet. She stared down at her wrist. Not truly.

But one day she would be.

---

Harry woke them up by lifting the tent flap. "It's time for training."

"Go away, you irritating pest," Draco groaned, pulling the blanket over his head.

"Training!" Hermione popped out of bed. She shoved on clothes, only taking extra time to brush her teeth and braid her hair.

"What is the meaning of this?" Draco tugged a shirt over his head, marching toward the front.

Harry held two plates filled with eggs and assorted fruit. "You missed breakfast, which Moody allowed today, but he won't tomorrow. He's strict about time."

"Who the fuck is Moody?" Draco snagged a plate and ate the food with unrushed bites. He didn't seem concerned about time limits. "And why should I care what he thinks?"

"The battle instructor. Trust me, after meeting him, you'll do as he says."

Draco laughed, taking another slow bite. "He couldn't teach me anything my father hasn't."

"Everyone trains. We're meant to be recruits."

"I'm not an Order member. Does the dog even know I'm here yet?"

"I don't think so." Harry seemed even more uncomfortable. "Bring your complaints to Moody. I highly recommend you don't do that, but it's your choice."

Draco sneered. "A man named Moody will not scare me."

---

"You're late," Moody admonished, staring Draco down. The way his eye moved disconcerted her. "This isn't a summer camp. We're training for battle!"

With wiry white hair, a heavily scarred face, and a magical fake eye that twirled in its socket, Alastor Moody gave the impression that he was always watching everyone.

Draco managed to hold in his usual snarky comments, crossing his arms.

Hermione nearly bounced on her toes in excitement. Having already participated in the training sessions at the Bristol base for a week, she knew a little of what to expect. Except this time, she'd get to participate in a true way, and not just grapple with Charlie.

"Where are the other muggleborns?" she asked Harry, looking around, noticing their absence from the thirty or so recruits.

"Moody didn't think they're ready for training. Most can't even read, and of those that can, they only know basic spells and have never held a real wand. Lavender is taking over their education, side by side with the littles."

There were times she recognized the complicated layers of her childhood. Titus didn't have to give her an education. It had been a dangerous indulgence on his part. If it hadn't been for access to an old pureblood library, basic lessons, and a wand, she'd be sitting alongside the other muggleborns, just now learning how to read and do sums.

"And Theo?"

"Treating a dragon fire burn already. He's still complaining, but he secretly likes being useful."

Moody didn't waste time trying to pit Harry against Draco first for duelling. "I want to see what you're capable of. Simple spells only. If you can't win with a stupefy, you're not talented enough yet to compete at all."

"No." Draco kept his arms firmly crossed on his chest.

"No?" Moody's voice sounded like a warning. The room around them straightened at the conflict, heavy looks passing from person to person.

"No," Draco confirmed. "Tell the Dog to admit me to your ranks, and I'll participate. In fact, I'll even teach you what I know about strategy and dark magic."

"Draco," Hermione tried to admonish, but he only cast her an annoyed glance.

"The Order doesn't perform true dark magic, boy."

"If you ever want to win against men like Dolohov, you will. At the very least, you'll need to know more than a petrificus totalus." Draco sneered in contempt. "The recruits in this room have probably never killed a man, and you expect to send them into battle with only light spells?"

Draco once trapped the evacuated Order tunnels with a dark curse for Titus' aurors, killing many of them— but by Moody's frown, he didn't seem to know that.

Moody's studied Draco, as if to crack through a mask, but Draco kept his dark magic tells well-hidden with occlumency. His face turned red in anger, and he stepped forward, revealing a limp. "We'll speak of this in private later. Everyone else—" His eye twirled, somehow landing on each person in a threatening way. "Back to practicing."

People snapped into action, dividing into duelling partners, chatter resuming.

"Why are you being so quarrelsome?" Hermione turned to Draco.

He kept his contemptuous expression. "One of the greatest lessons my father ever taught me was to never give myself to an organized cause that doesn't benefit me. No matter the side, it's a transaction. Until they see me as invaluable, they'll view me as disposable."

The hair on her neck stood up, sensing the horrific truth to that statement, though it still irritated her.

"They're housing us."

"As I said, they want to use me." He grabbed her chin. "And they want to use you too. Never forget that, no matter how much they dress it up with morality."

"Why won't Sirius let you join?"

"He wants me to complete a task first— an initiation. One that I don't really want to do for a multitude of reasons. I vowed not to give the specifics, so I can't explain."

Hermione understood now that Draco and Sirius played a game, seeing who would flinch and fold into the other's demands first. She hated not knowing the details, finding it hard to judge Draco's actions or motivations for his refusal to participate.

His expression softened, seeing her confusion, and he kissed her cheek. "Don't worry. I have it all under control. I'll work on potions with the supplies you've given me and train on my own."

Draco left with a wink, while Moody glared after his retreat.

"It's just as well," the battle-hardened instructor snapped, loud enough everyone could hear. "I've never met a Malfoy that I could trust."

---

Moody paired her with Harry, finding him a nearly equal opponent on a magical level, though she surpassed him in technique.

They limited their duelling to simple spells like Moody instructed: petrificus totalus, expelliarmus, stupefy. Sometimes Harry won and sometimes she did. By the end, she began to win more often, as if she'd turned on an old faucet waiting for the water to get warm after so long. The magic pained her hands by the end, having not used it in months, and she shook it off after each duel.

Draco still had not returned by lunch time, where they ate a simple stew in the largest hall. When Hermione finished, Harry stood before her, a hand on the back of his neck— his normal uncomfortable pose.

"What?" She set her bowl down.

"Dumbledore arranged for special combat training for you."

"Combat training? Like in the muggle way?" The few muggles in the Bristol tunnels practiced throwing knives, shooting guns, and grappling. She assumed it would be the same.

"Yes."

"Why just me?"

He shrugged. "You need to start at the beginning. The rest of us are far more advanced. When the new muggleborns are ready, they'll join you."

She wasn't opposed to the idea of bettering her physical combat skills, which were abysmal by all metrics.

After cleaning and putting away her bowl, Harry led her to a smaller building she hadn't seen before toward the back of the camp. When they entered, she spied targets nailed to the far wall; beside them were an assortment of displayed weapons, from knives to guns. A multitude of metal contraptions lined the opposite end. She'd seen Titus use similar weights to hone his muscles through the years, though these were the muggle equivalent. A giant mat

stretched across the center, and in the middle of it all, a familiar woman greeted them with a frown.

She recognized Maryam by the dark fabric wrapped around her head, the ends tucked expertly out of the way, wearing a loose dark shirt and trousers, covered head to toe even in the sweltering heat.

The last time she'd seen her, the woman had pressed a gun to her temple and threatened to kill her if she snitched. The parameters for being a traitor remained unclear. Did Maryam think she willingly gave up the location to the tunnels that Titus raided after her arrest? By her laser-focused sneer, she might.

"You left out some crucial details," Hermione seethed.

"Good luck." Harry exited before she could strangle him.

She needed to remember to kill the four-eyed wanker later for not telling her Maryam would be teaching her muggle combat.

"I know you just came from magical duelling," Maryam snapped. "You're probably tired, but — and this is very important— I do *not* care. If you complain, I'll just push you harder. They pulled me from vital missions to coddle you, so I refuse to let you waste my time." She glanced at Hermione as if she might whine at any moment.

"I'm not going to complain."

"Oh, you will, because today I'm going to push you to your breaking point."

Hermione remembered the woman's story well enough: the Death Eaters stole her muggleborn sister, and then Titus killed her whole family, only sparing her because she'd been a child. She later joined the Order and became a prodigy at sharpshooting, looking up to Garner as a father figure— the man she'd unknowingly sent to Titus' torture cells.

And, most importantly for today, she blamed Hermione for Garner's subsequent death.

"Now that you understand my first point, I'll cover the second." Maryam travelled to the wall and picked up three knives, strapping them to her body. "There will be no magic in this room. While it's useful, it's also a foolish crutch in battle. The Death Eaters won't politely wait for you to gather a wand if you lose it. In the field, they'll kill you in a blink. A single mistake, and it's over. Our bodies must be weapons, and our instincts trained to anticipate any danger."

Dread crawled up Hermione's spine. Whatever Maryam planned for her would hurt. "But I don't need a wan—"

A bolt of metal shot past her before she could finish the sentence, followed by a thud. A knife, she realized too late. The blade had skimmed past her cheek, barely nicking her cheek. She held up her hand, coming back with droplets of blood. She glanced back, seeing the knife buried the old wooden walls, pinning a few strands of her curly hair she'd sliced with it.

“Dead,” Maryam said simply. “With or without a wand, your magic didn’t save you. I missed my mark on purpose. If I’d wanted to, I could have landed it somewhere vital and hard to heal. In your eye. Your throat. Your heart. Even with charmed armour, I could have found your soft point. I didn’t gain this ability by anyone going easy on me. I’m just a muggle. I have no magic, no advantage, and yet I could still kill you if I desired. All I need is surprise, and I never miss. My talent is a result of years of grueling work, not luck.”

Hermione didn’t know how to respond. Her mouth remained open in shock.

Maryam had backed her into a corner with no recourse. If she protested, she’d seem as spoiled as she accused her of. Having lived a soft life, there might be some truth to her accusation, and Hermione already desired to prove her wrong.

And maybe there was also something to be said about the other truths she told. One day, Titus might cuff her again with obsidian. While she’d never be able to physically overpower a man like Titus no matter how much she trained, it would still be foolish not to prepare for it at all.

She understood the lesson Maryam provided: survival was luck, but it was also preparation.

Hermione clenched her fists, gritting her teeth in determination. “I’m ready.”

Maryam’s smirk held no warmth. “We’ll see.”

---

They started her muggle combat training by throwing knives until her hand cramped while Maryam barked criticism in her ear, forcing her into the correct movements. By the end, irritated with the insults, she withheld the desire to aim the blades at the woman’s head—though judging by her previous attempts, she’d miss.

“Will I get to shoot a gun?” Hermione dared to ask.

“Not until you show competence with simpler weapons.” She glanced at the scattered knives on the ground, having missed the mark with each one. “Don’t hold your breath.”

After a gruelling two hours, they began lifting weights on various contraptions until Hermione’s muscles screamed for it to end. Once again, Maryam seemed disappointed with her low ability, barking orders. Hermione thought that might be the end of the day, almost unable to move for the pain, but then the demon woman called her to the center mat to spar.

Maryam gave no mercy. Slam after slam to the ground, yelling about leverage and pressure points, as if it made any sense at all. She tugged her arms back into painful positions, relishing in her pain. By the end of three rounds, Hermione felt beaten and bruised, dizzy from the woman holding her in tight positions with limited oxygen, overwhelmed with pain.

“Ready to give up?” Maryam taunted.

“No.” She tried to shove the bitch off, but it didn’t work.

On the next round, Hermione managed a lucky hit, slamming her elbow into Maryam’s nose. Blood dripped, but it only increased the violence.

The fight devolved from professional to personal. The slams grew harder, and she twisted her arm until she cried out, far rougher than normal training, she suspected.

“Ready to give up now?”

Hermione grit her teeth, but she feared her arm might break if tugged any harder. She tapped the hand pinning her down. “I give up.”

Maryam waited a painful second and then released her. Hermione groaned and crawled to the edge of the mat, afraid she’d vomit. Bruises would cover her body tomorrow, even with potions.

Hermione sat against the wall, pulling her knees to her chest, still struggling to breathe, studying Maryam. The deranged woman was already standing, idly throwing knives at the target. Each struck close to the middle with a thud. One almost on top of the other. It impressed Hermione, having a new appreciation for the skill.

“Do you ever relax?” Hermione asked. For the first time in her life, she’d met someone with a more insane work ethic than her.

“I’ll relax when I’m dead. Now get out of here. We’re done for today. And I don’t care if you’re sore or dying tomorrow. If I must drag you back here by your hair, I will.”

Her prickly attitude reminded her of Carmen, which brought on horrible memories, the wound of it too fresh. The only difference between the two was that Carmen exuded an air of apathy and nihilism, as if seeking death, even within the confines of hope. But Maryam was lightning, constantly moving in her anger, her fury poised to burn whatever got in her way.

Trauma either caused a person to shatter, turn into themselves, or tear themselves apart with fury. Both Maryam and she—along with Carmen—fell into the last category. The anger had kept Hermione alive, sustained her, fed her enough to keep going, but it could easily start consuming her too.

Hermione thought she might have a lot in common with the muggle woman, though she didn’t dare say that aloud, especially with Maryam holding her beloved knives.

But still, curiosity made her stay put. “Why do you cover your hair?”

Maryam paused and then flicked her wrist to throw. “You’re not going to go away until I answer, are you?”

Hermione shrugged. “Probably not.”

Maryam walked over to the target, wiggling out the knives. “My mother believed she needed to cover her hair for her god. I used to watch her get ready in the mornings when I was little, wrapping put it on. When I joined the Order, I began to wear it as a statement.”

“For god?”

Maryam shrugged. “I was young when they died, and I don’t remember enough about the religion to practice— that was stolen from me too. If I survive the curse, I plan to reclaim it.”

Maryam didn’t expect to survive. She could tell by her sharp frown.

Titus had told her once that the muggle religions created rallying cries, and they needed to stamp it out to prevent rebellions. The government banned religious texts, public proclamations, and gathering in groups.

Hermione didn’t know what the innocuous-looking covering fell under. “Is wearing that illegal?”

She gave a nod. “More than illegal, it’s symbolic of what they deny us. And symbols can be dangerous.”

A tendril of admiration wiggled into her heart for the woman, understanding the importance of reclaiming a lost past. She stood and straightened her clothes, heading for the door.

“Granger,” Maryam said before she could leave.

Hermione turned in surprise. No one ever called her Granger except Draco, and it oddly sounded like respect, though she doubted Maryam meant it that way.

“Yes?”

Maryam touched the fabric. “A year before they stole my sister, an auror grabbed my mother from the market for daring to wear it in public. Dolohov had been the primary mediator in charge at the time, and he ordered a mass slaughter of religious dissenters after a minor rebellion in Wales. She refused to take it off, so they dragged her to a public platform and executed her alongside the nuns, priests, and rabbis... as an example.”

“Fucking hell,” Hermione’s stomach turned. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t give me your pity. I don’t want it. I’m telling you this to explain why I can’t rest and neither can you. This fight is bigger than our grievances. They want to take everything from us. Grind away our culture, community, and history, until we’re nothing more than the animals they think we are. For some reason, Moody wants me to train you. I personally don’t see any potential, but whatever the reason, I’m not going to let you screw it up for the rest of us. One of my last charmed bullets is named for Dolohov, and I refuse to die before I watch it enter his body.”

Hermione didn’t quite know the plans the Order had for her either. “I’m not going to fuck it up.”

Or, at least, she hoped she wouldn’t.

Maryam gave a short, mocking laugh.

Hermione ignored the acerbic response. “I won’t fail,” she said in a firmer voice. “I won’t complain, and I’ll help you put your bullet into Dolohov before the end. I vow it.”



Maryam paused for a long moment, studying her, eyebrows furrowed. She didn't smile or nod, but something shifted in her expression. "Tomorrow we'll mostly work on your footwork so your muscles can heal."

It was a surprising show of mercy that she'd take.

When Hermione left the building, she heard the repeated thuds behind her as Maryam kept training, refusing to rest.

---

Hermione found Dumbledore's tent separate from the others, under a giant old tree. She hesitated outside the entrance, wondering why she even considered the invitation. The way his eyes twinkled in interest caused suspicion to crawl up her spine.

But curiosity had led her to worse places before, and he'd managed to pluck the correct string in her soul to tempt her— she did want the truth, and only he could give it to her.

The outside of Dumbledore's Perkins tent was patched and worn like the others. When she ducked inside, she found a thick haze in the air as she bypassed a mass of cluttered objects of every shape and size. Interesting silver instruments whirled and released smoke, bookshelves were overstuffed with tomes she wished to peruse, and she spied a pensieve sectioned off in its own room.

The tent proved larger than it appeared, branching off into several rooms, but she easily found Dumbledore in the center living space, which had been extended to encompass a massive desk, a table, and a ritual circle made of salt dotted with dark crystals.

A phoenix perched on its stand in the corner, a great big avian with red and yellow feathers. She'd never seen one before, except in textbooks. When it noticed her interest, it cocked its head to the right as if understanding her thoughts.

Dumbledore sat in the center of the salt circle, hands on his knees, completely still. Magic hummed around him, calling her forward.

Hermione hesitated, unsure what to do. She found it awkward to stand in the space, filled with smoke from a nearby incense burner.

"Have a sherbet lemon," Dumbledore said before she could change her mind.

"Excuse me?"

Dumbledore cracked his eye open and pointed to a small side table near the phoenix, upon which was a dish filled with sweets.

"No, thank you."

Dumbledore looked as if he planned to go back to meditating.

The smoke, paired with the massive amount of whirring, twirling objects, caused a sharp sense of claustrophobia, giving her an overwhelming instinct to flee. But she refused to do so until he responded to her questions.

“Why am I here?”

This time Dumbledore did not crack an eye, face serene. “So that I can offer to mentor you.”

She took a step back at the simple proclamation. “I don’t need a mentor. I just need answers.”

He raised a single eyebrow. “I’m an old wizard, Hermione, crippled by dark magic, and far past my prime. And yet, with little effort on my part, I subdued you. Though your wandless magic is admirable from what I’ve seen and heard, especially given the challenges of your upbringing, it also remains stagnant in a state of raw talent. Unrefined. There are few people who have the knowledge or skill level that I do to help you advance. Power and intention mean nothing without education, focus, and control.” He studied her again in his calm way. “And I suspect you lack those last three qualities.”

Her cheeks burned, but she couldn’t deny his analysis. She tended to be too impatient to truly focus for long, and her mind too busy to clear it completely, though her determination offset it... sometimes.

“Why me and why should I trust you when, by all accounts, you’ve destroyed the entire world?”

Dumbledore sighed, as if she struck a rare nerve, and stood up. “I suppose you deserve a brief history before making your decision.”

He tucked his injured arm close to his side, as if it still ached, and walked to the burning incense. He brushed away the smoke with a swipe of his hand, dissipating it throughout the whole tent.

“My mistakes began with the Venus of Willendorf. I know you’ve seen it. Or really—the perversion of it. A mockery of its true form.”

The mention of the ancient statue brought her back to a dark place: the blood staining the old stone, years of sacrifice, newly coated with her own. “I have.”

He untucked a golden amulet from under his robes, covered in old runes. “I obtained the statue during the first war, around the same time I was given this to stabilize my magic after a terrible decision, keeping me alive.” Magic oozed off the amulet. Not a pulsing dark like the skin-bound book, but adjacent, as if it contained a nefarious presence, trapped within the metal confines, knocking to get out. She shivered at the sight, wondering why it affected her so much. “I’d become overconfident in my abilities, a hubris I’ve been atoning for ever since. The need to eliminate Voldemort made me desperate, and I’d discovered a way to end the threat he posed. By the time the curse occurred, only his body remained, which was accomplished at a great cost to myself, and I didn’t have much time left.” He raised his

withered arm as if to emphasize his point. “The final battle had been a surprise attack that I’d been unprepared for. I pulled the Venus out of my robes, thinking to use it as a last resort.”

He didn’t finish, but he didn’t need to. Though parts of the story confused her, she’d seen and experienced the result.

However, his story created just as many questions as it answered. How did he obtain the statue? Where did he get the amulet? What did it do? She had a sixth sense the answers he’d give would contain layers, hiding what he wished.

“Is Voldemort really dead?” she asked.

“I believe so. His body disintegrated.”

Hermione took a moment to sort through what he’d said so far, picking her next question carefully.

“Do the Death Eaters know you live?”

“Dolohov does, and he’s been hunting me ever since.”

“How did you survive the initial curse?” The memories she viewed during her early years only showed the battle, but never the ending.

He touched the amulet. “Because I wore this, I believe. It absorbed any lingering dark magic. Even still, I barely survived the apparition to the Forbidden Forest. I lived there with the centaurs for several years.” He walked to his desk and collapsed into his chair. “While I healed, I tried to puzzle out what had gone wrong and how I could fix it, gaining guidance from the Centaurs’ scrying the stars on the correct path forward. The first time I’d heard your name had been from Moody, who had been the only Order member who still trusted me at the time.” He gave a nod in her direction. “Or rather, I’d heard of your father. A brilliant mind attempting to save his young muggleborn daughter. He believed he could condense magic down to a mathematical formula, and subsequently discover the null of magic, which could be formed into symbolic runes. And miraculously— he did, though he kept his secrets close, and each object needed its own unique rune. Bullets snapped past armor. Bombs slipped past wards as easily as if he’d deactivated them. The Order overflowed with hope, and so did I, assured they neared the end.” His shrewd gaze stayed on her. “But you know all of this.”

“Only some of it.” Hermione tried not to seem too eager for more. She’d only heard scraps of information about her father, just enough to whet her appetite. She remained starved for truth and for her past, a murky place where she believed if she could make sense of it, everything in her soul might heal.

Hermione frowned. “I still don’t understand what any of this has to do with me.”

“It doesn’t pertain to you at all.” He picked up a sherbet lemon and placed it in his mouth. “But other variables do.”

Hermione started to get irritated again at how he hid everything instead of just telling her. Before she could puzzle out what she wanted to ask, Dumbledore opened a drawer, rifling around. He pulled out a thick stone tablet, chiseled with strange symbols she didn't recognize — reminding her of the mysterious runic language in the skin-bound books.

“What is that?” She wandered closer and sat down in an opposite chair.

Unlike the statue, the amulet, or the skin book, nothing pulsed off the stone tablet.

Dumbledore traced the chiseled symbols in thought. “Archeologists found this alongside the Venus during its excavation, although, unlike the statue, the magical community managed to hide its existence from the muggles. Unspeakables in the French Ministry assumed it to be the instructions for its use.”

“Can you read it?”

“It took many years to translate, but I think I understand most of it— which leads us back to you.” He glanced up, studying her again. “I shouldn't have touched the Venus. Creation magic is an exclusionary form of witchcraft, capable of only being wielded by *witches*. It had never been meant for me.”

He pulled out a beautiful handheld mirror from his drawer, the surface mottled with age, the handle a bright silver, and he set it beside the tablet.

“Only a witch can break the curse. Specifically, a muggleborn witch. The loophole demands its own ritualistic rules.” He tapped the stone tablet. “You sit before me as a single flame of hope in a dark world. An educated, muggleborn witch. Not only capable of magic... but *wandless* magic. Your rarity in this world cannot be understated. I know of no other.”

The last category intrigued him the most, because she'd met muggleborn women who might fit the other descriptors, including Lily. However, even within those parameters, she could admit there weren't many educated muggleborns capable of more than the simplest magic. Not because of a lack of talent, but a lack of access.

“My wandless magic is weak.”

“For now.” Dumbledore folded his hands on the desk in front of the tablet. “Do you know why you're proficient with wandless magic in the first place?”

“I practiced, I suppose.”

“It's more complex than that.” He grinned in a kind way. “In the history of wizarding kind, wands are a new invention. It's a wonderful tool, but still just a tool. Most wizards have relied on them so completely, they've forgotten the essential skill of how to cast without them.”

“Why did they stop if it's so important to learn?”

“Wandless magic is hard to wield. It requires years of training, a natural inclination, along with precise intentions, especially with more complex spells. It's far easier to use a wand

with formal latinized spells, especially for the average wizard. If they had allowed you to attend Hogwarts with a wand, you might have ended up a brilliant, yet normal witch. The fact they denied you a wand forced you to develop your natural abilities in your early years in a way most wizards do not, honing a magical foundation for the talent.”

“You know wandless magic though,” she reminded him. “I’m not special.”

He inclined his head. “Most powerful wizards know wandless magic on a limited scale, but even I relied on my wand far more than I should have.”

A realization struck her, powerful and sickening. She sat back, remembering Lucius' warning to Titus on the night of her attack in Diagon Alley so long ago.

*If you give her just enough, you can control her power. Leave her to her own devices, and she might grow hard to control, even for you.*

She’d been too excited about a real wand to understand its purpose. They’d never meant to help her, intending to disable her wandless magic before it grew. That was why she’d struggled with her wand at first, frustrated at feeling stagnant. The look of wariness Titus gave her as the sparks went off in Olivander’s now carried multiple meanings.

After everything, she didn’t think she could feel betrayed again, but the realization hurt under her ribs near her heart.

“You want me to break the curse?” He’d insinuated it earlier, but stating it out loud caused her hands to tremble at the magnitude.

Dumbledore seemed sad. “In this entire world, you might be the only witch qualified to do so. The Venus is ancient... so ancient that the ritual requires wandless magic. The core of a wand might potentially interfere with the spells.”

*A muggleborn witch capable of wandless magic.* She pieced the puzzle together.

“I— I don’t know if I can... or even if I’d want to. How would we even get the statue back?”

The weight of the world and her past pushed down on her. She’d planned to help the Order, but she didn’t join the group for that extreme responsibility.

Hermione had encountered offers like this before. He divulged just enough information to pique her interest, tempting her close to the trap, saving the best bits for when she entered, just to slam it shut behind her.

“I want to see your memories. I don’t trust you.”

He gave a nod, accepting it. “If you accept my offer, then one day, I’ll allow you into my mind. Until then, I don’t trust you either. I acknowledge this will be a leap into the unknown. I wouldn’t ask it of you if you weren’t the only witch I’ve ever found potentially capable of completing the task.”

What choice did she truly have? The mist would soon encroach and snap away everything and everyone she loved. They lived in a giant graveyard, the vultures circling above.

In exchange for doing the impossible, he offered her something only he could provide—training for wandless magic. A feeling buzzed through her. Maybe greed. Maybe hope. Maybe hunger. A culmination of everything she'd ever wanted for herself. He'd dug out the desire from her brain and presented it as a feast.

It was a feast with a heavy price. Oh, his old, gentle appearance didn't fool her. She recognized the ambition in his twinkling eyes, because it mirrored her own. She didn't trust the man in front of her, and she'd always keep one eye open, but she wanted to learn wandless magic far too much to ever turn down the offer. "I'll do it."

He provided no outward indication of relief—as if he always knew she'd agree. Instead, he picked up the mirror and handed it to her. "Then take this."

"What is it?" she asked in surprise.

The mirror felt heavier than the ones she'd owned, and the surface rippled like water, tiny waves sprouting from the center to the edge.

"A final test."

"What for?"

"Endurance."

"And if I don't pass?"

He only stared at her, unmoving. "Then, regrettably, you're not the witch I'm searching for. Power can be gained by study. Focus learned through practice. But determination is inborn. It's a reflection of a person's character and resilience. A strong resolve is the most important aspect of wandless magic. I can teach you everything, but it means naught if you waste it with a weak will. The fate of the world is at stake, and there is no room for error."

In her hands, she held the true choice. What he wanted her to do wouldn't be easy. Her heart warred between her continued hate for the man before her, her inability to trust any of his good intentions, no matter how benevolent he presented himself to her, and her intense ambition to learn more.

She suspected he'd allow her to walk right back out of the tent if she wished without any consequence.

Magic tingled at her fingertips—her birthright. The desperation for it from her youth lingered like a sickness in her blood, the thirst for it still slicking down her throat with burning pain. The purebloods had tried to deny her a true education at Hogwarts, intent on using her talent for their own gain, trapping her in obsidian.

And now in front of her, the treasure she sought gleamed. Everything Lucius and Titus feared she'd become if not correctly *controlled*.

“What do I do?” she asked.

“Look into your reflection and then... find your way out.”

“What if I can’t?”

“Then simply admit defeat, and you’ll return unharmed.”

If she admitted defeat, she’d never truly learn wandless magic the way she wished.

Hermione took a deep breath and gazed into the rippling surface.

Her reflection grinned cruelly back at her right before sucking her inside it’s confines.

---

The dark encapsulated her, absent of comfort. The edges of it pressed against her mind like knives.

“*Foolish little doll,*” a voice taunted with a laugh. Her own, she realized. “*Worthless whore.*”

Hermione groaned, but the laugh only increased.

She was in the dungeon again, she realized, without a lantern, the rats skittering in the distance. Except in this empty place, no one could save her. Not Titus. Or Draco. Or Theo. She’d need to find a way to pass the bars herself.

“*Stupid Sprite, raised to only be a breeder. That’s all you are and all you will be. Nothing more than another piece of furniture in the manor, waiting for its master. A ghost. Meant to be used and then put back in her cage.*”

“I’m not.” Hermione pressed her palms to her ears to drown out the horror. But it did no good, because the voice originated from within, taunting her with her own fears and shame.

“*That’s all you are to Draco too,*” the voice laughed again. “*Something to win. An object to flaunt in front of Titus.*”

Hermione tried to swipe at the voice, and when she did, she thought she might see the ripple of something.

“*A disappointment to your father. A waste of his legacy.*”

“I’m more than that,” she seethed again, crawling forward in the dark. Shattered glass littered the ground like in the club. It lacerated her knees as she continued her broken scabble into the hopeless void. She tried to stand, but invisible hands kept tugging her down.

“*You’ll never make it.*”

“I will.” She’d rather die than be nothing more than a house pet, her life meaningless beyond what she could provide for other people, every choice stolen. They’d call it love while they

carved out all the pieces of her soul, displaying them like trinkets in their palms until those too shattered.

*“You’ll fail this task, and everyone will die because of you.”*

Finch floated before her, pieces of his skin rotting away, his expression one of condemnation. *“You didn’t save me.”*

“No— I tried.”

Julie and Dean arrived next, rotting just like Finch. *“You can’t save us either.”*

The desire to stop haunted her. Each fraction of a movement forward twisted into agony, electric shocks prickling down her spine. She wished to give in and curl into a ball in the corner somewhere. It hurt too much, her soul heavy from unshed tears.

Draco’s name almost trembled on her lips, wanting him to save her, but she couldn’t let him this time.

Hermione wept in a way she hadn’t since Finch. Phantom hands ripped at her hair in the dark. The voices tormented her with every secret fear she’d hidden in her life. That she wasn’t strong enough. That one day, Titus would once again trap her for good, and she’d have to learn to be a happy little doll. That she’d never get to truly live a normal life. That all her friends would die, one by one.

That one day she’d watch Draco dragged to his execution— all because of her failures.

The wavering light grew closer, and with it the dark increased its efforts to keep her within its cage of pain. She screamed against the unending current trying to shove her back.

Hermione had always wanted something intangible, a deeper need of the human spirit than magic or education. Something Titus believed had always been too dangerous to give her, afraid that if she grasped it herself, her choices might open the cage to let her fly away.

It was something even Draco might fear to allow her completely, though he’d never admit it.

Something so great and important, she’d fling herself into the fire to attain it. An idea that couldn’t exist at all in the framework of their society. What she desired lived in the spaces of the unknown, and she’d never attain it if she valued safety or comfort over it.

As the rippling light drew closer, the voice boomed louder, rattling her skull, screaming the insults and fears in her ears.

*Stupid. Worthless. Naive. Spoiled, little house pet.*

Hermione ignored it and reached forward to the light.

And for the first time in her life, she grasped true freedom.

---



Hermione tumbled out of her mind, finding that she'd fallen out of the chair and had crawled toward the phoenix. It had flown down from its perch, landing in front of her, tilting its head to the side in clear interest again. She trembled, feeling as if she'd survived a long battle, dizzy from the abrupt whiplash of going from the conscious nightmare back to the stark reality. Aftershocks of pain still zipped along her skin.

"Well done, Hermione," Dumbledore praised somewhere behind her.

The mirror fell out of her hand, clattering to the floor. She shoved the horrid thing away and then glanced up, meeting the phoenix's piercing gaze.

Spreading its impressive wings, it gave a slow, low bow, and a single bright red and yellow feather released, floating down to land in front of her.

Her father had believed that feathers were messages from fate. After she'd found the goldfinch feather at the creek, he'd explained to her in a solemn tone that it symbolized endurance on a long journey.

"What does it mean?" she whispered.

"The rebirth of the soul after adversity," he answered. "Fawkes seems to believe that you're the witch I've been seeking. Our hope for the end. It's a display of respect for what you're about to risk." Dumbledore stood and walked back to the salt circle. "Which means there is no time to waste. Join me in the center for your first lesson, where we'll be learning how to clear your mind of distractions."

The phoenix kept her pinned down with its stare, seeing straight into her soul, waiting for her to find the courage to move. A message from her father rested before her— instructing her to rise from the ashes of her past and transform.

Without hesitation, Hermione grasped the phoenix feather, holding it up to the light, claiming her fate.

A rare lower stake chapter! Cuddle it, because we're in the eye of the hurricane, and the roller coaster will soon begin again lol.

This chapter took so long because I was actually rewriting and editing two chapters at once. The second is close to completion, so chapter 57 should be posted in a week or two after alpha/ beta edits!

# Chapter 57: The Language of the Sword

## Chapter Notes

Song Suggestions:

SVRCINA- “Meet me on the Battlefield”

Woodkid- “Iron”

Silent Child- “Seven Nation Army” (The White Stripes cover)

A big thank you to my beta, MyPrivateInsanity, and to my alpha readers for their work on this chapter!

Also, another big thank you for all of your comments and messages on ao3 and various socials. I read every single one (and reread), even if I don't always have the time to respond to them all. They truly do motivate me!

Trigger Warnings at the end:

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

## The Language of the Sword

“It’s hard to live in reality when I wish to reside in dreams with you,” a man whispered.

A phantom hand trailed along her bare hip, drawing inward to the junction of her thighs, and she opened them in welcome as he entered her— or maybe he didn’t enter her at all.

Something about the sensation felt incomplete, existing in a shroud of mist.

Their bodies shifted without conscious movement, ending with her straddling his waist. She rolled her hips, chasing the euphoria.

“Where are you hiding?” The voice sounded different than she expected, but she couldn’t figure out why.

She struggled to think. “I don’t know.”

“Patience,” he urged, guiding her hips to a slower pace. “Think a little harder. What did you see yesterday? Give me a detail.”

*Dragons*, she almost said. “I— I can’t remember. I’m so close—”

Seconds before release, the hands on her hips forced her to stop. The shadow left her, and her body turned heavy as lead. “I don’t reward disobedience.”

Hermione gained awareness, finding Titus under her with his dark hair curling more than normal, sporting a slight sunburn, his beard grown out again.

For an entire year he’d tormented her. Nothing worked to prevent it, neither dreamless sleep nor any other potion. They’d tried minor rituals to release the ties, and still Titus appeared at night.

Before he could stop her, Hermione struck him across the cheek, finding it satisfying to see his face twist to the side with the force.

“Careful, Sprite.” He touched his cheek and then grinned back up at her, showing off his infuriating dimples.

“Fuck off.”

“Are you finally staying to speak with me instead of pathetically running away?”

“Only to tell you to leave me be and to stop giving me nightmares.”

Her practice at meditation had improved her ability to lucid dream. This was her first attempt at truly interacting with him.

“Nightmares?” Titus rolled his eyes. “Always a little liar. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask have you told Malfoy yet how eagerly you fuck me in your dreams?”

“What’s the point when I imagined it was Draco the whole time?”

He sneered, thumbs digging into her hips. “Do tell him the reason you’re so desperate for an orgasm when you wake is because I left you wet.”

Her hatred for him grew alongside her guilt, both poisonous flowers sprouting petals in her soul. Because he was right— she always enjoyed the pleasure in the hazy mist of dreams, only realizing too late that she shouldn’t have.

He tugged her so she pressed forward on his chest. She caught her fall, both hands landing in the wisps of shadows behind his head. “It’s only a matter of time before I find you. The location spells haven’t worked, which means you’re either out of the country, in the tunnels, or behind specific wards.” He brushed a curl behind her ear. “All I need to do is wait for someone to fuck up.”

Hermione did her best to keep the fear off her face. It made it easier that the dreams made her reactions slower.

*Dragons*, she’d almost said. The thought made her nauseous, realizing how close her subconscious had been to accidentally giving up something important. At least she knew he couldn’t read her thoughts. If he could, he’d never have tried to weasel out information from her.

“If you told me your location now, I’d be far more merciful than if I discovered it on my own,” his voice turned deceptively gentle.

“Now who’s the liar?” His old threats loomed over her like a guillotine, though she sensed the bluff. Even if he did guess they’d escaped the UK, he couldn’t just invade countries without alienating the remaining governments in the curse boundary. He’d need ironclad proof to proceed.

He tilted his head, studying her. “You don’t have to tell me everything. Just give me a single clue, and I’d allow you to keep five prisoners alive. Your choice on who. Personally, I’d recommend the Weasley twins. I admit that I admire their ingenuity and wish to commission new projects.”

She sat up just enough to grasp his throat, wishing him to be real only so she could strangle him.

He ignored her, giving a wider grin, as if he thought this a game. “Since I’m feeling generous tonight, I’ll even consider raising it to ten, which is my final offer.”

“So you’d allow Draco to live if I asked it of you?”

He wouldn’t.

He evaded the answer and then touched the leather wrapped along her wrist, the horrid jewellery present even in the dreamscape. “It’s a shame you didn’t remember to remove this. As you’ve realized tonight, it might be the single mistake I’m looking for that’s ruinous to your plans.”

She leaned down again, close enough their lips almost touched.

“You don’t have power over me, and you never will again.”

She tried to open her eyes in the real world.

“Don’t leave,” he lost his grin, sensing her fading. “This is the first time you’ve spoken to me in a year.”

It was, and she already regretted it.

He tried to grab her and keep her in place, but he couldn’t hold her there. The dreams remained as flimsy as shadows, as wispy as clouds. Everything vanished on command.

Now wide awake, Hermione stared at the sloping fabric of the tent above their bed, hating that her body still tingled from his edging. She considered waking Draco to ask him to finish her, but she didn’t want to upset him again, and he slept so peacefully.

Silently, in shame, she slipped her hand in her knickers and brought herself to completion, knowing Titus wouldn’t know the difference.

---

The sun peeked over the ridge on the horizon as Hermione used the pale light of morning to read her father's papers.

It hurt to hear his voice through the ink, remembering the cadence, how it sounded as he told her stories. Sirius had written most of the account, taken straight from his memories leading up to and right after the Beltane massacre. The singular point of view meant the accounts might not be entirely accurate, distorted by his bias, so each morning she reminded herself to read the parchments through several lenses to uncover the truth.

To her shame, Titus had been right about some points. Her father knew there might be children in the room when he set the bomb off, and still decided to go forward with his plan. While he didn't target women and children specifically, he didn't make any provisions to reduce the impact on innocent people. His hatred of most purebloods sounded eerily similar to how Titus viewed muggles.

A week after the Beltane massacre, her father's demeanour had turned cagey, as if he no longer trusted the Order, though she couldn't discern why.

In one of the last entries, Sirius had found her father near a fireplace in his study. He'd just dumped a stack of parchments on the flames, watching as the pages curled and burned.

"Your research—" Sirius had rushed forward to put out the flames with an aguamenti. The extinguished flames caused smoke to billow around the room. "You destroyed it all."

"Not all of it. Only what has been compromised."

Sirius tried to fish out the parchments, but they disintegrated in his hands. He glanced up in shock. "Why would you do this?"

Her father had only looked furtively back and forth, as if the walls could listen. "Because it's not safe here anymore."

"You're not making any sense."

Her father began to walk away, ignoring him, and Sirius followed. "I wish I could trust you, but I don't have that luxury."

"You spent years on that—"

"And I shouldn't have!" Her father closed his eyes. "I just made everything potentially worse. It's too dangerous to say more until I uncover what I suspect. If you're as good a man as you present yourself, then promise me that you'll watch over Hermione if something happens to me."

"Watch over Hermione?" Sirius couldn't hide his confusion. "What do you think will happen?"

"I don't know yet, but I have to go."

“You can’t just leave. You’ve changed the tide of the war. We... need you.”

“It’s not a war if only one side is living their lives.” Both men paused. Her father reached out to touch the doorframe, as if for balance. “I’ll return and finish what I started if I find out—” he sighed. “I can’t say any more right now. I need your promise.”

“Of course, I’ll watch out for her.” Sirius reached out to touch her father’s shoulder but dropped his hand. “Just— have Remus help with your wards again. Even if you don’t trust me, you should trust him.”

Her father answered with a nod but didn’t turn around. “When she’s old enough, tell Hermione to search in Aesop’s for answers. Her favourite one.”

“You’re speaking as if you’ll die soon.”

“It’s a possibility, so if I do, tell her that the key to knowledge can only be found through endurance after a long journey. My research belongs to her and only to her, a cruel and terrible birthright though it may be. And lastly tell her— tell her that I’m sorry I wasn’t able to save her from this world like I thought I could.”

Despite several more protests from Sirius, Robert Granger left the Order.

The final pages of the parchments discussed the chaos and upheaval after her father’s subsequent death and the infiltration by the aurors of the tunnels where his desk and research had been.

No further shred of research had been found since that day, and it might no longer exist at all.

She’d read through the account again and again, attempting to understand the coded language, finding it difficult to untangle the last riddle. Her father referenced Aesop’s fables. That much she knew. Draco had a copy of the muggle collection in his library, and she’d sifted through it already several times. The problem— she couldn’t remember her favourite fable to understand the reference, and a brief session of legilimency with Draco searching her early, fractured memories wasn’t productive either.

Hermione ran her finger along the ink, wishing to dredge her father up from the grave just for a day to hear his secrets.

However, she’d run out of time, the rising sun brightening the sky. The past could wait for tomorrow.

As she stowed away the parchments, a familiar tendril of dark magic wrapped around her leg, slithering up her spine. She turned her attention to the bookshelf, seeing the skin-bound book resting innocuously behind enchantments.

The wards vibrated, doing their best to enclose the book. In truth, it only dampened the danger. She dragged a finger along the shelf, sensing both the zing of protection magic mixed with something ancient and slimy, squeezing at her lungs.

Each day it proved harder to resist its call, a siren song just for her. The pulsing dark magic brushed along her skin, seeking its way inside, her veins aching as if overfilled with magic, ready to burst. Though it sometimes hurt, the call also tasted like seduction, a promise of power, and it took a great amount of self-control to deny it. She'd once asked Draco if he felt the same pull, and he'd only looked at her in concern. Since then, she'd kept it to herself, afraid of the implications.

For the hundredth time, Hermione withstood the dark summons and continued her day.

---

Maryam's arm pressed against her throat, legs wrapped around her waist.

Right before losing consciousness, she sighed in frustration and released her. Hermione rolled over, gasped in a breath, and collapsed on the mat below her with a groan.

"Another stupid mistake," Maryam snapped. "You should have tucked your chin into the side like I taught you."

Hermione hated every bit of their training sessions. No matter how hard she worked, she remained average at muggle defence. She might win against a person without training, but not the average auror.

Charlie was right. When it came to physically fighting, they might as well fold her up into a pretzel. She'd need to take the weakness into consideration if she ever found herself in a vulnerable position without her magic.

Hermione managed to be slightly more competent with her aim, now able to land a knife or two, eventually reaching the same level of skill as the other trainees, finally graduating to guns. And her fitness level had increased substantially.

One thing she'd give Maryam—the woman never gave up once given a task.

Unfortunately, Hermione *was* the task.

To be fair to herself, she didn't think she could ever meet Maryam's stringent standards, even if she succeeded at being a prodigy.

Hermione gritted her teeth through the subsequent criticisms as Maryam went through each move and what she did wrong. There was a lot to cover, as usual, but Hermione suffered through it, knowing she didn't have very many options.

"Are you even listening?" Maryam noticed her waning attention.

"I'm trying my best, but I don't think my brain can retain any information after you cut off my oxygen for so long."

Maryam stood up in her frustration. It seemed to infuriate the woman that she was failing at turning Hermione into a physical battle axe, but her stance softened. "Go to Dumbledore."

Hermione obeyed the order, scurrying out of the building toward her next task.



---

The giant boulder in front of Hermione needed to be moved across the stream to encourage waterflow down the mountain, so she closed her fist, imagining what she wished to happen.

Dumbledore had started their training that day by meditating. It used to drive Hermione bonkers, unable to go a single minute without her mind wandering. However, over time, one minute turned to two. Two turned to five. Five to thirty minutes, and before she knew it, she'd succeeded at clearing her mind for hours at a time—a similar practice to occlumency. She slipped into the raw void of nothingness like the water in the pond, silencing external and internal noise.

After she'd conquered meditating to his standards, Dumbledore allowed her to finally learn how to wield true wandless magic.

It proved no different in theory than a child's first accidental bursts. Both needed intention and desire, but much like turning on a faucet of water and struggling to turn it back off, it could potentially turn fatal if not handled correctly. A simple *lumos* could brighten the entire city if a witch wasn't careful, using every bit of their energy, risking injury or death.

The only true difference between the two was razor-sharp focus and precision. Thinking the latinized phrases helped expedite the process, and the void in her mind centred all her energy into the command, allowing more control over starting and stopping.

Back to her task, Hermione lifted the boulder, controlling the exact amount of power needed. It no longer launched in the air, as it had before, or merely trembled against the other rocks. It raised at a perfectly reasonable height as she brought it to the edge out of the water.

"Excellent," Dumbledore praised. "Try it again, but this time I want you to attempt two at a time. As I've taught you, use one side of your mind for each. And do your best to refuse the temptation to use your hands. You must break the habit, or it will leave you vulnerable to the obsidian shackles."

Directing a double spell was the most complicated magic she'd ever encountered, one target for each hand, though it required using the same curse. It was so advanced that Dumbledore urged caution in performing the technique except in dire circumstances. So far, she'd only attempted an easy spell like an *expeiliarmus*, though she'd once managed to use an *incendio* on two trees.

Hermione prepared her mind, lifting the boulder again, hating using wandless magic in a different way than she'd learned it. It felt similar to using a non-dominant hand to write, completely unnatural, unwieldy, and requiring twice the amount of effort.

Before she could attempt to raise a second boulder, a familiar dragon's roar interrupted her focus. She glanced up to see Etelka circling above.

"Charlie's back!" She stood up, and the forgotten boulder dropped with a crack.

He'd been absent for months on several missions, both in Britain and in other parts of the world, to increase recruitment, donations, and support. Charlie's return signalled news of the

outside world away from their tiny pocket of peace.

“We’re not finished with the lesson,” Dumbledore reminded, though he grinned, showing he’d allow the rare diversion.

Hermione barely heard him, leaving her boulder behind to sprint toward the dragon pens.

---

Something was wrong.

Charlie didn’t call her dove, or wink, and barely acknowledged his siblings. He only looked at Moody. “We need to talk. It’s urgent.”

Everyone sensed the dark mood. Beyond a single prank from the twins during dinner, turning Ron’s skin into a fabulous shade of magenta, the group ate in silence, giving furtive glances to each other. A heaviness descended, and each person felt its weight in their own way.

Draco studied her when he thought she didn’t notice, his mouth in a permanent thin line.

They’d lived an entire year in peace. Hermione understood she’d been residing inside a bubble that needed to pop soon. Would they be called to war? Dumbledore gave no indication he thought her ready, despite her improvements.

Hermione stayed silent through dinner, stuck in her thoughts until Draco abruptly stood. “Where are you going?”

“I need to prepare something,” he answered.

“A potion?”

“No... but when you finish your meal, we need to have an important discussion.” He said nothing else as he exited the great hall in a hurry.

If possible, the statement twisted her trepidation into something more sinister than Charlie’s serious mood.

Hermione forced herself to finish her dinner, taking her turn to clean the dishes in the kitchen alongside the few volunteer elves.

On the way back to the tents, a dragon patronus wisped into view, curling around the tents in a shimmery mist, resembling Etelka.

*Meet me at the Dragon pens. It whispered in Charlie’s voice. Tell no one else.*

Hermione glanced back and forth, but she remained alone. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. What did Charlie need to tell her that no one else could hear?

---

She found the dragon tamer leaning against the fence while scratching under Kinga's chin. The black and red scaled dragon gave a ferocious rumble of disapproval when Hermione neared, snapping her teeth.

"Behave, big girl," Charlie soothed.

Kinga billowed out hot steam in Hermione's direction, waddling away to another section to rest.

Hermione mirrored Charlie's pose, elbows on the fence beside him, staring up at the stars. "How did your mission go?"

"It went exactly as I thought it would— poorly." He sighed and shook his head. "It turns out that people don't like to align with the losing side."

"We're losing?"

It wouldn't surprise her. It didn't seem as if the Order was doing much at all, besides the occasional raid or guerrilla attack, fading back into the shadows. But what did she know?

"Morale is low, and that's an indication that things are not healthy in the ranks. We lack money, recruits, and international support. Things aren't looking very good." He seemed to be chewing on his thoughts. "I have a question."

"A personal one?"

He turned to her. "Would you kill Nott if given a chance?"

"I'd... try." She might have killed him at Beltane if it weren't for the wards' retaliation. Her anger had tasted white hot, her fear potent, overriding any rational thought. But in cold blood? Hermione refused to make any promises. She'd once tried to cast an Avada on him, and she'd failed, despite intense hatred and fear. Grief betrayed her. A true Avada needed cold indifference, not hate or a fractured love, and his charmed armour blocked most of the other dark or violent curses.

"Did you know that Nott and I were friends once?" He curled his hands around the fence post, displaying the various healed burns on his fingers. "We were rivals in quidditch, just a few years apart in age. But he never participated in the usual taunting from the Slytherins, and he never performed any underhanded moves. He seemed to want to win because he was better and not because he'd cheated. I thought he might be honourable because of that. And when he arrived at the old dragon sanctuary for auror training several years later, I actually began to respect him, despite my reservations, and I think he might have respected me in return. A rare event for him, I've come to understand."

"Until he became the Butcher," Hermione summarized.

Charlie looked at her for a long time. "He'd always been the Butcher, dove. I'd just viewed his ambition in a better light than it truly was. I think you understand that even better than

me. The worst part of it all is that I truly think he believes his decisions are justified, especially during his early days as an auror. But as the muggles say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

The uncomfortable sensation from earlier returned, the low swoop of dread. “What has he done now?”

“Before I tell you, I have a second question. Probably more important than the first.” He lifted her chin so she couldn’t look away. “Would you sacrifice yourself if it meant saving those you love? Answer truthfully. What would be your breaking point?”

“In what way? My death?”

“No, your life.”

“I don’t understand.”

He sighed. “Come with me. Words will cheapen it. I think I’ll have to show you.”

---

Charlie’s tent resided next to the prettiest meadow, closest to the dragon pens, with his siblings’ tents set up nearby. The interior looked clean, though messy and cramped, as if he’d forgotten to finish his projects midway through to do something else.

Charlie didn’t seem embarrassed about the clutter, leading her through the main room. “Malfoy won’t kill me for bringing you to my bed, will he?”

“Absolutely. I’ll request that he murder you painlessly though.”

He winked at her, but it held no warmth, their banter stale, knowing she was about to be shown something terrible.

In his bedroom, a small, familiar black box sat on a small table.

“A muggle television?” she asked in confusion.

“A charmed one to prevent interference with magic.” He patted the box with affection. “It works without access to electricity. Titus mass commissioned them, providing many of them to the major cities. I thought it important to obtain one to watch the publicized broadcasts, though the distance can make reception prove spotty.”

When she’d left Nott manor, Titus had just started to implement a monitoring and broadcast system, ordering a screen for each city square with plans to include them in muggle homes. He’d been so adamantly against muggle technology for most of her youth that it still felt incongruous.

She sat on the edge of his bed as Charlie pushed a button on the black box, and an image popped up on the glass screen, frozen in place.

Titus stood on an execution platform in front of an ornate pale-stone building with a clock tower on top. He was dressed in his full Death Eater regalia, and he'd fixed the mask she'd shattered at Beltane. Pale silver lines filled the cracks, magically soldering the slivers together, resembling a web of mercury on black glass.

Body parts floated behind him, limbs separated from torsos, decapitated heads hovering in the air with the red Xs still glowing on their foreheads.

Hermione wished to look away from the gruesome scene, but she couldn't. Her eyes remained stuck to the fixed screen.

"Where is he?" She tried to swallow, but her mouth had become dry.

"Liverpool."

"What is he doing there?"

"Purging."

She whipped her head around to stare at Charlie.

Purge— the word turned into a dark whisper from Goyle's party in his seaside castle long ago. She remembered Titus' short history lesson. After the wizards subjugated the muggles, they had completed several purges, ridding the population of excess mouths to feed: the infirm, the elderly. The act had disturbed her then, and after understanding the world better, it now horrified her.

She didn't want to ask the next question, afraid of the answer. "Who is he targeting with the purge?"

"Mostly men. Specifically, unmarried men without children. I'll give Nott credit that the young and the old are always spared."

"But the men haven't committed any crime."

Charlie furrowed his brow. "Dolohov believes that the adult muggles have grown too numerous. In his exact words, 'breeding like rabbits.' And in Nott's eyes, all muggles of a certain age, who are raised without *civilized* wizarding influence, are inherently capable of criminality, especially in cities rife with rebellion already. It doesn't matter if they actually committed the crime or not."

"How long has this been happening?"

"Half a year now, and he's far more brutal than usual, broadcasting the executions as examples to the populace. He picks the cities at random, first rounding up the men he believes could potentially be a threat, sparing some for the camps. The remaining lot he— well, I think you can make an educated guess. It can last days. Some cities and villages attempt to fight back, but it only ends in more death. Usually, he gives a trite speech about protecting peace and order, but this time his message was for *you*."

“Me?” She felt ill. “When was it filmed?”

“This morning.” Charlie’s finger paused on the play button, ready to press it, but he waited. “If you don’t want to see it, I understand.”

“But you think I should see it?”

“I think you should make informed decisions. Sirius likes to treat your generation as children still, but that approach only endangers us all.”

“Play it.” She didn’t want to see the execution, but she also refused to hide her head in the sand.

Before she could change her mind, the still screen came to life.

Blood began to drip from the severed body parts, painting the wood below, now stained so heavily it turned black, congealed in places with scattered bits of flesh. She remembered the scent of fresh death viscerally. Even viewed on a screen, a reflexive gag tightened her throat.

“I have a message for Hermione and to the terrorists who have stolen her.” Titus flicked his wand, exposing the leather bracelet she’d made him long ago wrapped along his wrist. One of the few remaining living people floated toward him. He fought valiantly against his bindings, but it did little good. His eyes widened enough she saw the whites surrounding the iris. Titus forced the man to his knees in front of him, gripping his hair firmly, while holding the wand to his throat like a knife. The man could be anyone: her father, an order member, an average citizen, a camp worker. He wore every face. “Return to me, Sprite, and I may find it in my heart to have mercy against those who have wronged me.”

He removed his wand, pushing the muggle away with his boot, as if to display his potential for mercy. The red X vanished from his forehead, but the man stayed frozen, as if unable to move in his terror. Titus motioned to two aurors standing off to the side, and they dragged the man quickly out of sight. “Take him to the camps.”

Titus didn’t waste time floating a second struggling man in front of him. Tears ran down the muggle’s cheeks, closing his eyes tight. “And this—” he placed the tip of the wand against the man’s neck. “Let this be a clear example of what will happen if you don’t earn back my mercy. Until you are safely back inside my manor, I will *tear apart* every single city to find you and the other muggleborns. I’ll search under every rock and behind every tree. I’ll obliterate the rot growing in the dark corners of this great nation until it is once again a beacon of safety and order.”

This time Titus did not display mercy. He ripped the man apart with a dark spell, unravelling his limbs. Blood sprayed so far it speckled the camera lens. The noises haunted her the most, the screams and then the gurgles. But, fortunately, it did not last long.

Titus straightened after the death, sending the unravelled body parts to float with the others, his dark clothes and mask hiding the fresh crimson stains. “You have one week to respond, Hermione. Meet with me under the safety of a traditional Treaty of Parley, and we’ll

negotiate terms that I believe will suit all parties involved. If not, the number of terrorist sympathizers I'll expose and eliminate will double."

Charlie clicked off the video, and she stared at her open-mouthed reflection in the black glass. Her mind turned over the information in the tense silence, understanding the implications.

Titus did nothing without strategy. He brought her into his speeches and increased the violence to serve three purposes.

One: to turn the muggle populace against the Order in their fear, blaming them for the purges.

Two: to turn the Order against Hermione. She represented hope for Dumbledore, but to the others, her life wasn't worth the escalation of brutality.

And three: to guilt her into returning to him in an attempt to reduce the violence, though she doubted any treaty he created would eliminate it.

Nausea overwhelmed her; she swayed slightly from side to side to retain her balance.

"Why am I just now being informed of this?"

"Dumbledore and Moody thought you might be tempted to... negotiate as he wishes, which would only be disastrous."

Dumbledore kept her in the dark about the atrocities, wanting her to focus on training until he decided the time was right. But she'd already endured a lifetime of that, and she refused to be kept blind or have her decisions controlled by another person again.

"So why are you telling me now?"

Charlie stood with the same sour expression he'd worn upon arriving back to camp, indicating he had more bad news to deliver. "We've been here a year, dove. From what I know, Dumbledore plans to keep you here another year more, or possibly even two, while the muggles suffer. I can't allow this to continue as it's been. Something needs to change."

"There's more, isn't there?"

He grimaced. "Tonks was in Liverpool trying to recruit people when Titus arrived. As a Metamorphagus, she's disguised... for now."

"I thought you said he mostly targeted men. Is she in danger?"

Charlie levelled her with a loaded stare. "I know you're not naive, Hermione. What do you think happens to young women who don't have steady jobs or have children?"

Hermione wished to protest that Titus wouldn't allow that, but she remembered the rows of rooms for women in the camps. When confronted, he'd dressed up the option as a cushy choice for convicted criminals, convinced it provided them with a better life. But she knew

now that many of the women had been framed on purpose by men like the late Montague Sr., trafficking people for money. If Titus believed the women to be criminals, he'd allow it.

"What happens to the rest of the citizens after the initial purge?"

Charlie sighed and sat next to her. "After the initial executions, Nott tasks a contingent of aurors and ministry employees with registering, tracking, and assigning jobs for each citizen. It can take weeks, and the conditions they endure in the lines are horrific. They first filter out the youngest and oldest, along with established families. The few prominent muggles capable of providing favours or paying off the aurors are next. The unattached and unemployed women are the last category that they sort. If they're lucky, they've already been trained in an essential skill and can be put to work. If not, they're sent to the camps and given two options for their future."

She didn't need any details on the two options available.

"Tonks isn't registered," she deduced.

Charlie shrugged. "We always carry fake papers, but they don't always hold up to scrutiny, depending on who's looking, so I fear they'll discover her real identity." He leaned close. "We *need* to retrieve her."

"I thought the Order leaves behind members who are caught or injured for the safety of the whole." That's what Charlie did to Garner when they tried to kidnap her. Many Order members had false teeth implanted filled with poison that they could activate when necessary.

The glowing orb lights showcased his bloodshot eyes, as if he'd been crying. "No matter how much I care for her as a friend, I'll leave her if there are no other options. I just want to get close enough to assess the situation first."

"So just a reconnaissance mission?"

"Hopefully, a rescue."

"And why are you asking me?" Hermione narrowed her eyes, and then figured it out before he could speak. "Sirius ordered you not to save her, didn't he? And now you want my help?"

"Sirius believes it's too dangerous to even spy. We can't afford to lose people on something like this when recruitment numbers are so low." He sighed. "Sirius isn't calling off the rescue because he's cruel. He loves Tonks. They're family. He promised Andromeda he'd look after her before her death. But in my opinion, over the years, he's lost the courage to lead. The sacrifices and deaths have worn him down, making him too cautious. He's forgotten the true goal of the Order."

"Which is?"

"Everything good we've lost. I'm tired of hiding in the shadows, just barely escaping Nott and the aurors. Not when innocent people are dying." He held out his hand for her to take.



“I’m telling you the truth now, because I believe it’s yours to do with as you wish. And I’m asking you to join me, because I know that even if everyone else told you *not* to do something, you’d still do it if you felt it was the right thing, especially for your friends. I need that type of loyalty by my side.”

Hermione didn’t know Tonks, but she understood friendships. What Charlie asked of her went against the higher ups in the Order, especially Dumbledore. The old wizard wished to keep her wrapped in security until the correct time, letting the others absorb the backlash. Could she sit and watch everyone else drown in her place?

Hermione grabbed Charlie’s hand and squeezed. “I’ll go with you.”

He tugged her up and into a tight hug. “Thank you,” he whispered into her hair.

“Who else will be going?”

“Let me handle that. Meet me back here in a couple of hours.”

---

Hermione found Draco sitting at the library table in their tent with the same pensive expression he’d worn at dinner. In front of him rested an old skeleton key she’d never seen before.

“What is that?” she asked.

Draco chewed on the inside of his cheek, a rare nervous tick she’d only seen a few times before. “A different option.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Charlie doesn’t send a patronus at night for a little chat. He wanted something from you.”

She didn’t know how he knew about the patronus, but Hermione gave a deep sigh and explained everything Charlie told and showed her in detail from start to finish. When she finished, he only stared at her, fidgeting with his wand in pensive thought.

“The Order is losing recruitment, Hermione, and has few allies or resources,” he finally said. “It’s a fool’s errand to help.”

She had a sinking realization while staring at the skeleton key. “You want us to leave the Order?”

He sat still as a statue. “I never planned to stay, Granger. It was necessary to join them at first, so that I had time to secure a proper location for us.” He tapped beside the skeleton key.

“This connects to a house in the mountains of northern Spain, near the sea. It’s a property of my mother’s that neither Nott nor my father are able to access. I’m told Nott is aware of the basic location and has paid the locals to stake it out. We couldn’t take the normal route, so I made a portkey.”

Making an illegal portkey required a great amount of skill and a touch of dark magic. It both impressed and repulsed her. He must have worked on it all year.

“You made that without even asking me if it’s what I want.” She turned and left the room, so that she didn’t react in anger.

Draco followed her into their shared bedroom. He watched as she slid off her clothes, pulling on a black shirt and trousers and her dragon hide boots. “Listen to reason. Please don’t be stubborn. Staying with the Order is suicide at best.

She began to braid her hair. “I can’t leave. Maybe I could have years ago, but if I do now, I doom everyone. Who else qualifies to break the curse?”

“Don’t tell me you actually believe that old fool. I thought it wise to allow him to train you in wandless magic, but there are plenty of others who could replace you. If you want me to find someone else to fill the role, I will.” He narrowed his eyes. “But I will *not* let you sacrifice yourself for their cause.”

She’d explained to Draco long ago what Dumbledore wanted from her. She should have realized by his tight-lipped expression and the subtle red cast to his eyes that he never planned on letting her go through with it.

He’d refused to train with Moody or integrate with the group, because he believed it all to be temporary, using his time to make potions, train himself, study his dark grimoire, and, apparently, make illegal portkeys.

Long ago, she’d desired to run away with Draco and live a halfway Idyllic life tucked away into some corner of the world, trying to ignore that the mist might snap at any moment, but she could no longer rest easy in isolation. What future would she have?

“Will you bind me if I don’t go?”

“What?” Draco blinked, surprised.

“Will you bind me and force me to go to this location?”

He frowned. “Of course not.”

She walked closer, touching his clenched jaw. “I have friends here. What happens to them if I leave?”

He grabbed her wrist, taking it from his jaw, refusing her comfort. “The only clear memory I have of my mother is holding her severed hand, Granger.” His lips twisted in pain. “I endured seeing Deanna’s last breath. And you expect me to stand aside while others lead you to an early grave? I’m not losing you too. Please... leave with me.”

Her heart broke, but she couldn’t do what he asked of her. “I’d leave right now if I thought it would be a true escape.” Hermione reached into the chest and extracted the phoenix feather. Earlier in the year, she’d fastened it to a necklace so that she could always keep it close—a reminder of her goals. She slipped it over her head, tucking the feather under her shirt. “But

there's no escape. I can't abandon people, and you can't either. As much as you pretend to hate Harry, he's your friend."

"Acquaintance," he corrected.

"*Friend*. And Theo is too. So don't make me do this alone. I need you by my side, and they need you just as much as I do."

Hermione walked away without looking back, only stopping to grab a small medic bag Theo had created, including many essential healing potions and supplies, and strap it around her waist. She flung her black cloak around her shoulders, fastening it against her throat right before pushing through the front entrance into the night.

---

Hermione slipped among the tents, attempting to make as little noise as possible, knowing the rest of the inhabitants slept peacefully.

Others already stood with Charlie when she reached the dragon pens. She recognized Harry first by his glasses glinting in the moonlight. The twins and Ron leaned against the fence beside him, each with their own shade of red hair.

"Is this all?" she asked. It seemed a paltry number for what they might need.

Charlie gave an unworried shrug. "Turns out that I don't trust many people to not snitch."

"Where's Theo?"

"I didn't want to worry him," Harry admitted, looking guilty. "I left a note."

"We should leave before they stop us." Ron fastened a set of ancient armour on his chest. The charms held on by a thread. Wearing nothing might have given him more protection.

"Not without me," Draco snapped. She hadn't even heard him arrive, and neither had the others. They collectively turned in surprise, watching as he stepped out of the dark. He wore black clothes as she did, contrasting against his pale skin and hair. Even though the material of the shirt and trousers could repel spells and charms, he donned added armour—just as expensive and slimmed down as Titus'.

"I didn't invite you." Charlie crossed his arms.

"And how would you stop me?" Draco strapped his wand into a holster on his arm, alongside several vials of potions she suspected could kill in various ways. "I doubt you lot have strategized any great plan."

Ron looked ready to protest, but Charlie tapped his shoulder before he could say anything. "There's no time to argue, let's go."

Before they could take out their brooms, Draco dragged Hermione in close, leaning down to whisper. "If I can't convince you to run away, then I plan to end this for good."

She relaxed, but he wasn't finished.

"I'm all in now, Granger, because you're right. We can't live this way. But I need you to remind the Order that I'm not some snivelling rich fuck with a bleeding heart who they can command." He allowed the red to peek through to emphasize his point. "That means if they sacrifice you for their cause, then I swear to Merlin, I'll turn them all into inferis."

A chill crawled up her spine; she was unsure how serious he was. "It's my cause too."

He leaned his forehead against her own, groaning low with frustration. "Then do everything I say when we're in the city and don't you dare fucking die."

---

They flew the same route they took to Romania, but in reverse. The man at the floo outpost didn't threaten them like he had the last time, especially when Draco glared at him.

The stars still twinkled overhead when they exited the building back into England, apparating to the vegetable garden at the front entrance to the tunnels they'd used a year ago.

"We'll stay here tonight and travel the tunnels in the morning." Charlie picked a few tomatoes off the vine to eat later.

The tunnels seemed less warded and less comfortable than any others she'd stayed in, and without the luxury of rooms. When they climbed down, a large vacant space greeted them, already occupied by a young man she didn't recognize. He looked small for his age, with mousy brown hair.

"I've been waiting for hours! Colin Creevey," the boy introduced himself before she could ask, sticking out his hand for her to shake. "I've been excited to meet you. It's not often I get to introduce myself to a fellow muggleborn."

"Muggleborn?" She'd never seen him before. "Did they rescue you?"

"No, I've never lived with the purebloods. Sirius found me before the Death Eaters could. The Order raised me."

She shook the outstretched hand in awe. A free muggleborn! "What are you doing here?"

He held up a muggle camera strapped around his neck. "I'm in charge of photography."

She turned to Charlie who shrugged. "Nott has been using his broadcast system for propaganda, so I thought we might retaliate in our own way. I plucked Creevey from a separate training camp several weeks ago after catching him trying to photograph some butterflies."

Colin kept the camera close to his chest with pride. "I charmed it myself. It can film too, though sometimes it takes a few hard taps of a wand and several shakes to switch."

"Brilliant." Hermione gave a nod, understanding Charlie's plan.

---

At dawn, they began their journey through the labyrinth of tunnels, crawling out in the middle of a field. Since Hermione, Draco, and Colin hadn't been to this safehouse in Liverpool, they side-alonged with the others who'd visited before, preventing anyone from getting lost or splinching.

They landed in an old Order safehouse owned by Kingsley on the outskirts of the city. She coughed at the dust, finding it hard to see outside the dirty windows.

The dark blanket of night hid them when they exited, their camouflage aided by a low fog and disillusionment charms. Creevey struggled with producing the charm, so he huddled with Harry under his cloak as they walked along the road with their wands out. They kept close to the rows of houses, occasionally hiding behind abandoned cars before scrambling to the next cover.

Nothing moved. She barely even heard insects or birds.

"Where are the people?" Hermione whispered to Charlie.

"Most have long been dead or have moved. Not many live here anymore. A couple thousand at most, I believe."

Based on the size of the city, she believed it used to host a much larger population before the curse. Much like London, the echo of time haunted the deserted spaces, the old evidence of life— a lost shoe or a discarded toy— littering their path.

They stumbled on the first corpses when they neared the main road. The unmistakable smell of rotting flesh hit them first. Hermione gagged, covering her mouth, alongside the others, but even if she blocked her nose, she tasted the foul scent. Someone— Colin, she believed— rushed to a footpath and vomited up his meagre dinner.

The stars illuminated rows of mutilated bodies wrapped in fog lining the road. They were strung up upside down with their feet pinned together, naked and decapitated, suspended in the air, their arms dangling to the ground, frozen with rigor mortis.

Buzzards picked at the flesh, and flies swarmed. Even through the dark fog, she spied the giant stains of blood on the concrete below.

It was worse than she'd anticipated.

"How many did Nott kill?" Harry asked, voice muffled from behind his palm.

"Twenty-five this time, I think, including six that he dismembered on the platform. Maybe more though. Our spies couldn't get an accurate count."

Hermione wished to join Colin in his retching, but swallowed the bile. She needed to see the carnage left behind by the man who'd raised her.

"And you're sure he's gone from the city?"

Charlie gave a nod. “He’s back at the ministry. Our spies know that for a fact. He left a contingent of aurors and officials behind for the grunt work yesterday, though we don’t know how many.”

Charlie led the group behind an abandoned bus and pulled out a map of the city he’d obtained. They had spent the previous night as a group studying it, arguing about the best way forward.

“We’ll start by spying first, focusing on figuring out the number of people in the city, both wizards and muggles, where the aurors are stationed, and if there are any easy access points. After we meet back up, we’ll craft a plan to rescue Tonks based on what we discover. You two can come with me.” Charlie grabbed Colin and Ron by their shirt collars. “We’ll stake out the north side to try and get a glimpse of Tonks. Fred and George, you go to the east. Malfoy and Hermione, you take the south. And Harry... with your cloak, I’m going to need you to risk getting a bit closer, but don’t do anything foolish. We’re only gathering information at this time. Meet me back in this exact spot in an hour.”

Charlie tapped the map. It multiplied into four, and he passed them out to the small teams. The twins gave a unified salute, renewed their charms, and set out on their own mission.

“Nothing foolish,” he said again, pointing at Ron, Harry, and Hermione, as if they were the most likely to do so. He grabbed his two charges and disappeared down the road.

Harry secured his cloak around his shoulders. “See you—”

“You’re not going anywhere.” Draco had been quiet most of the day, so his harsh tone caused them to pause.

Harry seemed confused. “But Charlie said—”

“As if I’d ever listen to any strategy thought up by a fucking Weasley. None of you idiots even made contingency plans, or even an initial plan, really.” He made a threatening step towards Harry. “Granger wanted me to pledge myself to your cause, so now that I have, I plan to end this my way.” Draco searched his armour, pulling off a small vial. Polyjuice, she knew, just by its appearance. “Acromantula venom has been difficult to source outside of England, so I only have enough for two. They aren’t large doses, so we need to be smart about this.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said.

“Why just spy on them, when you can eliminate them?” Draco pulled out another handkerchief with a random hair. From the way it was carefully folded with a numbered label, he’d taken it from his father’s stash of dead individuals to impersonate. He glanced Harry up and down. “I think you could easily pull off a dress, Potter.”

Harry blinked a few times, trying to comprehend. “Are you saying you want me to pretend to be a woman?”

“Yes, and I’ll disguise myself as an auror.”

“But I don’t have any fake papers!”

“Exactly. They’d be suspicious enough to take you straight to the top officials to be interrogated.”

“But there are still too many aurors here. We’d just get captured. How would this help Tonks?”

Draco scoffed. “Weasley’s delusional. Knowing how Nott operates, and how he sets up his registration and interrogation systems, I doubt there’s a way to extract Tonks from the crowd without risking a lopsided fight, if she’s even still alive.” He pulled out another vial. “If you want to kill a hydra, you don’t waste energy cutting off the heads. You target the heart.”

Polyjuice tended to not last very long, even at its most potent. They’d need much more to sip on to get in and out without detection, though by what he’d just told them, Hermione suspected Draco had an entirely different goal than the others.

Hermione stopped them before the plan could devolve any further. “And what will *I* be doing?”

Draco crossed his arms, glaring down at her. “You’re going to stay hidden under Potter’s cloak and stay right next to me, using your wandless magic to secure the building when I give the order.”

“But if Harry is polyjuiced, he can’t carry his wand. Even if I keep it under the cloak, he’d have to waste precious seconds retrieving it if things go wrong. If I took Harry’s place, then all three of us would be armed to defend ourselves.”

Seconds mattered in a fight. It made perfect sense strategically, even if Draco hated the idea.

A tense, silent battle took place, while Harry glanced back and forth between them with wide eyes.

Draco cracked first. He glared even harder, but his stance loosened. “Fine.” He pointed at Harry. “You wear your invisibility heirloom. I’ll impersonate a guard. And Granger gets to be the bait.”

---

Obtaining the hair of an auror for Draco managed to be easier to accomplish than she first suspected. After slowly making their way closer to the center of the city, avoiding the rotting corpses on display, they stumbled into a patrolling auror.

He opened his mouth to shout, but Draco’s curse hit first. The diffindo sliced into the auror’s neck, cutting it to the bone, and he fell limp to the ground. Once assured of the man’s death, he dragged the man by his feet behind a rusted car.

“We didn’t have to kill him.” Hermione said.

Draco reached down and ripped a few brown strands of hair away from the dead auror.

“Empathy is wasted on a man like this.” He shoved the man around with the toe of his boot, and then carefully checked each pocket, finding nothing helpful or interesting, besides an ID card. “He’s not even an auror. He’s a hired mercenary from France.”

Draco placed the hairs into the vial. It bubbled and turned into a gelatinous, unappetizing concoction. He grimaced once before tipping his head back and swallowing the sludge, shifting quickly into a doppelgänger of the man sprawled at their feet. After studying the man’s clothes, he tapped his own and transfigured them into nearly an exact replica. Only someone with a keen eye would notice the differences.

Unrolling the labelled hair, Draco handed her the second vial of polyjuice. Her mixture turned out more inviting, gleaming with a golden hue. After drinking, the skin on her hands lightened to a paler shade. She assumed her hair turned darker by a few escaped strands she could see, but it remained tied back into a braid out of the way. Without a mirror, she didn’t know what she looked like now, but it didn’t matter. She transfigured her clothes to look more worn, dirty, and far less expensive fabric than they truly were.

“What’s next?” Harry asked, already invisible with his cloak.

“I stole this strategy from a muggle story. We’ll call it the Trojan Horse. They’ll allow us into the center of the beast, thinking we’re harmless. They’ll be too assured of their power to think otherwise. Then we’ll spring the trap, keeping a few of them alive. After that, we’ll take control.”

“And what’s the contingency plan?”

“Something far darker and more costly.” Draco touched his armour where he kept his vials, now hidden by transfiguration. “I’ll only use it as a last resort, so do try to not fuck up my original plan, Potter.”

---

Draco’s hand grasped her upper arm, tugging her along as a true auror would after finding a random muggle woman roaming the city without papers. They crossed the main road, walking toward a tall, ornate building—the one featured in Titus’ filmed execution. The Royal Liver Building, Charlie had called it during their strategizing the previous night.

Draco had made them review the steps to the plan several times. She listed them now in her mind, trying to find the weakest point, which was always the polyjuice. As soon as it faded, they’d need to attack.

Liverpool seemed in worse shape than any city she’d ever seen, pockmarked by fire and decay. Most of the windows on the buildings had shattered—long ago, she assumed, by the condition. Roots wrapped around road signs. Trash littered the fractured roads, with weeds growing through as if nature was already attempting to absorb it all back into the earth. But other damage was new: the husk of a building smouldered to her right. Blood splatters freckled the pavement, with flies buzzing over them.

“Keep up,” Draco snapped when she almost tripped over a broken piece of asphalt, though he didn’t let her fall. Harry’s footsteps sounded louder than she liked, but she doubted anyone



could hear them over the noise of the crowd growing in front of them.

She kept her hood up, face down, eyes on her toes, unwilling to make eye contact as she'd been instructed. The scent of death doubled the closer they walked, and she spied the remnants of the execution platform, heavily stained with blood. A waterfront was nearby, but in the dark she found it hard to see much except for a few fishing boats in the distance, outlined by the moon.

The area in front and beside the building hosted more than a hundred muggles. Most of them were sunburned from being outside all day, sitting huddled together in an area lit up artificially with lumoses, laying their heads on each other's shoulders with clear exhaustion as armed aurors prowled among them. One of them handed out cups of water, which the people guzzled down as if they hadn't had any for some time.

Hermione bristled with disgust. They treated muggles like cattle, herding them around to wherever they needed them, making sure they stayed productive, eliminating the ones they wanted, and tracking the rest to make sure they stayed in their place.

The feeling in her gut returned, the one that had haunted her for years. The thrum of her memories travelled with her magic, fingers stretching with the urge to be used.

Hermione cleared her mind as Dumbledore had taught her, allowing the void to drown her rage. She needed to remember that, at the moment, she was supposed to be a helpless muggle and not a witch with wandless magic.

She didn't need to try hard to conjure fear. It already filtered through her. What they planned to do was dangerous, something the Order wouldn't even dare, maybe not even Charlie. But she trusted Draco and his contingency plans.

When they reached the building, the clock tower gleamed above them. Draco shoved her in front of the most official looking ministry worker, who floated a clipboard with a quill perched on top, poised to write, while reading a scroll.

"Laurent," the ministry worker greeted Draco when he noticed them, studying her from beneath bifocals. "Who do you have here?"

"Found this one trying to hide." Draco seamlessly adopted a French accent.

The official ran a hand over his prominent moustache, smoothing it down. "You sound different than normal."

"The plants here don't agree with me. I haven't stopped sneezing all day. I'll need to find a healer soon for a potion."

The official nodded as if that made sense, and he sympathized. "Go ahead and give me her papers. I'll register her and deal with the punishments."

"She doesn't have papers."

His quill paused. "None?"

“She’s being evasive too.”

The man smoothed his moustache again in thought. “Lift your head, and let me see you.”

Hermione kept her head down, but the man had a short temper. He grabbed her chin, flicking it up.

“Ah, a pretty one,” he said, stroking her bottom lip.

Draco dug his fingers into her shoulder, as the man kept a firm hold on her chin. “We need to bring her to be interrogated and her memories searched. Nott ordered it.”

“Shame,” the official sighed and let her go. “That young lad, Pucey, will want her for himself. Wait a moment and let me finish, and then I’ll bring you to them. I’m interested in what they’ll find out.”

---

The man led them through the crowd of sunburned and weary muggles, following him to the front of the Royal Liver Building. Compared to the rest of the surrounding structures, it remained mostly intact, still beautiful with the windows unbroken, a sturdy roof, and with limited vegetation growing around the foundation.

The official entered first, scaling the steps and opening the door. Harry tripped beside them, though the official didn’t seem to notice. Draco thinned his lips, giving a sharp warning glare.

Once inside, her feet shuffled against the pale tile floor, passing by a few aurors. When they entered a lift, magically fixed for this occasion, it rattled as it brought them to the upper floors.

Their journey ended in a luxurious wood-panelled room with red carpet and a single long table, which reminded her of the judges at the Trials.

Hermione glanced up long enough to study the occupants of the room just as the doors slammed shut behind her.

Rosier Sr. looked the same as he had at Goyle’s seaside castle. What he’d told her that night still crawled down her spine, now knowing exactly what he referenced. The fact he’d been left in charge of sorting the muggles disgusted her.

She believed the man sitting next to Rosier was one of Titus’ higher-ranked aurors. Pucey occupied the next; she only recognized him from brief encounters at the pureblood dinners. From what little Draco had told her about him, he’d always been a weasel of a man, terrible at quidditch, and absolutely terrified of Draco and his father throughout his time at Hogwarts.

And on the far right sat Blaise Zabini.

Hermione emptied her shock into the void. If someone entered her mind, they’d encounter nothing more than a black pit.

Zabini had his feet propped up on a chair beside him, not paying attention to anything when they walked inside, aimlessly glancing at his fingernails.

Besides the four men seated in a row, only two aurors guarded the doors.

“We caught a stray,” the moustached official said, clearly excited. “A rather pretty one. Healthy looking compared to the others... and she doesn’t have papers.”

The men in the room sat up in interest.

“There’s always one that tries to run,” Pucey grinned. “Have you already checked her for a wand? The Order likes to hide spies in the stupidest places.”

“I checked her,” Draco's tone went deeper than his usual. “Seems to be a muggle. Probably just misplaced her registration, but I thought it wise to check.”

“This is why I’ve urged Titus to implement other forms of tracking instead of registration papers. Too many errors,” Rosier said.

“And who are you?” Pucey ignored Rosier and tilted his head at Draco, as if something pricked his intuition.

“A mercenary from France,” the official answered for him.

Pucey tapped his fingers on the table in thought. “Quel est ton nom et d’où viens-tu?”

“Vous pouvez m'appeler Laurent et je viens du Mans,” Draco answered.

Pucey sat back, satisfied with the answers. “Search her again, Lewis. We can’t be too careful.”

“With pleasure.” The moustached man ran his hands along the outline of her body, lingering on her breasts and hips longer than he should have. Draco’s fingers dug into her shoulders again so hard she thought she might bruise. Hermione studied her shoes. If the purebloods in the room were as observant as Titus, they’d have noticed their expensive dragon hide boots—something they'd overlooked transfiguring.

Following the plan with urgency, Hermione kept her face shrouded as best she could, allowing the magic to pool in her hands until it hurt. It arrived much faster than it used to. With focused thought, she locked the doors without moving. She waited to see if anyone heard the click, but no one did.

Step one: complete.

After searching her cloak and pockets thoroughly, the old man gave a last squeeze and a pat to her hip, releasing her reluctantly. “No wand. But she’s as healthy as I thought,” he leered. “If you’re smart, you’d enter the ranks of the whores. You might even get lucky enough to be recruited by Yaxley and serve the wealthy clients.”

By the time he pulled away, her polyjuice had begun to vanish, the skin on her hands rippling. Pucey or Rosier might not recognize her true face, but Zabini would. She kept her eyes on the floor, knowing most of her appearance stayed hidden. She tucked her hands under the edges of her cloak, heart pounding.

“Before we search your mind for the truth, let’s see your face.” Pucey unrolled a scroll and dipped a quill in ink. “If I like your appearance, I might be convinced to be gentle with the legilimency.”

Hermione refused the order. With a subtle lift of her wrists, she erected a silencing charm, intending to keep the noise contained inside the boundary.

Step two: complete.

“A shy one?” Pucey grinned. “My favourite kind.”

“Get on with it, Adrian. I’m fucking bored, and I want to get out of this decrepit city.” Blaise finally sat upright.

“You’re bored? This whole day, *you’ve* been the bore.”

“Muggles don’t interest me. I don’t know how you like fucking them. Where’s the challenge?”

“Because it’s depraved. It’s fun to roll in the dirt every once in a while. You’re missing out.” Pucey motioned to Hermione with an impatient wave of his hand. “Now, hurry up. You don’t want to make me angry. Take off your cloak, so we can properly see you.”

An invisible touch to her shoulder from her left indicated Harry standing right beside her under the cloak, and a squeeze from Draco affirmed what she already knew. If her disguise had already faded, Draco’s wasn’t far behind.

“I’m losing my patience. Take off your cloak or we’ll rip it off.”

Hermione raised her head, locking eyes with Blaise, giving him a sharp grin. “You shouldn’t have invited me inside.”

His eyes widened, expression morphing into the same delicious fear he’d displayed while pinned to the wall, bleeding from her crucio. His chair clattered to the ground as he sensed the trap. “It’s Nott’s mudblood—”

Hermione tugged Blaise’s wand out of his hand with a nonverbal expelliarmus, slamming it hard against the floor with a crack. The wand broke in two, erupting with sparks.

The purebloods scrambled to respond, but not fast enough.

“Avada Kedavra,” Draco shouted. A green light struck the top auror at the table just as he raised his wand, and the man slumped over in his seat.

Curses clashed between an invisible Harry and the two aurors at the door. She thought he might have incapacitated one right away, like they'd planned, but she didn't have time to check.

Without a second blink, she bound Rosier as he stumbled out of his seat with a shout.

She aimed for Pucey next, but as she raised her wrists, Draco shoved her down, an incoming blue curse zipping above her head.

The moustached official who'd groped her tried to cast a second curse toward Draco, missing again.

"This is for touching her!" Draco flung a potion. The liquid infiltrated the blue protego around the official, splattering across the man's face. The corrosive substance sizzled on contact, dripping off onto his hands and melting his lips together. He couldn't even scream as he died.

Curses zipped over a crouched Hermione as Harry battled the remaining auror, Draco joining in the fight.

Hermione glanced up, locking eyes with Blaise again, who was bent over his still sparking, broken wand. They both knew he had nowhere to go. Wrapping herself in a blue protego, she stood and shoved the vacant table up and out of the way, both her wrists raised.

"How does it feel to be as helpless as a muggle," Hermione taunted.

Blaise barrel rolled, managing to escape the first red-hot curse she flung at him.

She stalked closer without hurry. Zabini tried to scramble away. Without his wand, he had no protection against her—just as Julie had had no protection against him.

She squeezed his skull, wishing to explode his head like the man in the camp, and he screamed in pain. Perhaps she *was* like Titus, because she savoured the sound. This time, she sensed the pulsing blood under the thin skin. If she wanted to, she could slice through every fold in his brain, only needing to crack past the bone.

She stopped as his nose began to bleed. No matter how satisfying it would be, he deserved worse than a quick death. When she let go, he collapsed on the ground, eyes rolling back, unconscious, and she placed a binding spell on him as a precaution.

By the time she turned around, the two aurors guarding the doors, Titus' auror at the table, and the official moustached man who'd touched her were dead.

Only Pucey remained. In the fray, he'd crawled away like a coward without fighting. He now fruitlessly tugged at the door.

"Help," he tried to rattle the knob. "Intruders! Help me!"

"No one can hear you." Draco's polyjuice had worn off completely by the time he walked over and plucked him up by his shirt. "You've always been so fucking pathetic."

“No! I’ll do whatever you want Malfoy, just—”

“Oh, you’ll do that regardless. Imperio!”

Pucey squealed once, and then his features slackened, eyes empty. Draco released him. “Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Go tell all the aurors in the city that Titus Nott needs them right away. Make it sound like an emergency, but be sure to send them somewhere that the authorities won’t immediately send someone to investigate. Tell them to wait patiently for his next orders. Reassure them that you and the aurors inside this room can handle the rest of the muggles in Liverpool. Oh... and behave like yourself and act as if something has just gone terribly wrong somewhere else in the country. We don’t want anybody suspicious.”

Hermione kept the silencing charm up, but she released the locks.

Pucey face shifted. Somehow his mouth and eyes morphed back into his normal arrogant expression as he walked outside the room.

Once gone, Hermione made a quick sweep of the room. She found nothing important besides a pile of scrolls, charmed to be resistant to water. It wasn’t resistant to fire though. She threw all the muggle registrations Titus had ordered to be completed into a pile and set it on fire, watching as they turned into ash, and then she extinguished the flames.

---

Hermione watched outside the window. When Pucey informed them of their new orders in an urgent fashion, the aurors seemed confused, but they didn’t disobey, treating it as the emergency they assumed it was.

They apparated away over the course of several minutes, until only Pucey remained, standing like an animated dead man in the middle of the women, awaiting new orders.

Draco leaned close next to her. “You see, you don’t need to defeat every soldier to win a battle.”

They’d cleared an entire city crawling with aurors with barely even a fight, and they didn’t even need to use Draco’s darker contingency plan to do it.

“I killed him,” Harry stared at the dead auror at his feet, holding his chest. “I really killed him.”

“Pull yourself together, Potter. We don’t have time for your pointless morality crisis.”

“I— I’ve never—” Harry cut off with a hard swallow, eyes watering, and Draco only sneered at him without pity.

“What should we do with Pucey, Rosier, and Blaise?” Hermione asked.

“Whatever you want.” Draco twirled his wand lazily in his hand. He turned his attention to her. “I’d recommend just killing them. Not sure why you bothered to bind them. There’s no reason to keep them alive. Whatever is decided, we need to do it quickly.”

Draco handed her the decision. Hermione studied the unconscious Rosier, and then she glanced back outside to the women waiting to be registered and the blood-stained platform, still lit up with the hovering lumoses.

“I don’t know what I should—” she paused, curling her hand into a fist, letting the magic pool there again, finally allowing the anger to infect her soul. “Actually, I know exactly what I want to do. Bring them to the platform.”

Draco raised an eyebrow, already sensing the direction of her thoughts. “Are you sure? You can’t take it back, and it will escalate everything.”

Hermione allowed the dark parts of her soul to crawl to the surface.

“Wasn’t that your point with this stunt? Titus has already escalated things, and he’ll escalate further. Charlie’s right, we can’t run and hide in the shadows forever. He gave me a week to respond to his summons.” Hermione’s resolve hardened. She stared at him, wondering if he approved of her plan.

In response, Draco closed his eyes with a sharp grin, and when he opened them, they gleamed a bright red. “Then let’s send him your reply.”

---

Hermione walked outside and into the crowd. Faces peeked out from nearby buildings—people who’d already passed the registration, allowed to stay in the city.

Hermione ignored the confusion around her, keeping the hood of her cloak down, exposing her identity, the phoenix feather purposely displayed on her necklace. There was no reason to hide any more.

Draco walked behind her, dragging Rosier and Blaise with magical ropes. He didn’t bother being gentle, letting them slide and roll against the broken concrete.

Blaise groaned, eyes beginning to flutter open from the pain.

“Mercy,” Rosier cried. “I’m an elderly man.”

His voice irritated her, remembering how it sounded when he told Titus he thought she looked old enough to breed, proposing the purges. He wasn’t some harmless grandfather, frail and innocent.

“What do you want?” he continued. “If It’s money you’re seeking—”

She silenced both with a flick of her hand.

“Go on Pucey, crawl up the stairs onto the platform,” Draco ordered when they neared the frozen man. The crowd had already given him a wide berth.

Pucey obeyed without even a twitch of resistance.

“The Order,” a woman whispered as she walked past them.

Gasps echoed through the crowd, as they finally realized what might be happening.

Hermione scaled the execution platform, stepping through the congealed blood, stopping when she reached the center, exactly where Titus had stood. A discarded severed finger rested near the toe of her boot, and she withheld a grimace.

Once in an elevated position, she touched her throat, amplifying her voice. “The aurors are gone,” she informed the muggles. “But not for long. I’ve destroyed all the documents I could find. If you want the chance to escape, you should take it now.”

Nobody moved at first, still confused, absorbing the turn of events, but soon chaos erupted, people darting back and forth. Some stayed still, unsure if it was a trick or worth the risk.

Draco dragged their captives up the steps in the interim, depositing them beside Pucey right behind her. He bound his old Slytherin roommate like the others, tapping his wand against his forehead, releasing the Imperio. Pucey woke with a startled gasp, but did nothing else but tremble, because Draco’s wand was pressed near his spine.

They didn’t have to wait long for the hidden Order members to emerge, since they’d been spying. The twins walked out first from the east, both laughing in surprise, as if they’d just witnessed the best prank.

Charlie appeared soon after, with Colin and Ron running to catch up behind him. “What the fuck happened?” he shouted when he neared the edge of the platform. “I thought I said not to do anything reckless?”

“I prefer to do things my way,” Draco answered. “And I’m never *reckless*.”

“I should be angry you didn’t listen to me.” He pointed at them, red-faced.

That implied he might not be angry at all.

“Did you find Tonks?” she asked

A beat of silence. Charlie’s features darkened. “Not yet.”

If she wasn’t in the crowd, then three things might have happened: she’d found a way out herself. She’d been discovered and placed in a ministry cell... or she was in the camps still disguised as a muggle.

No matter what happened, they couldn’t waste time. Titus might arrive at any moment.

“What are you doing up there?” Charlie asked.



“As you suggested, we’re retaliating in our own way.” Hermione turned to Colin. “Do you think you could hack the pureblood broadcast system?”

The boy’s hands trembled on the camera, and he frowned. “Not me, but there’s a muggle back at the base I think who could do it.”

Hermione straightened, the beat of her heart in her ear, magic thrumming with her blood, ignited by years of rage.

The Order had hidden Titus’s atrocities because they knew she’d find a way to respond to his summons. She couldn’t let him continue his purges. Not with her name falling from his lips with each death.

As Draco told her, the only way to kill a Hydra was to strike the heart of the beast.

The decision to continue proved to be a simple one to make.

“Then start filming.”

---

Colin set up his camera, flicking buttons on and off, giving a few shakes and taps of his wand.

The muggles who’d decided to stay gathered at the bottom of the execution platform, though no one spoke. They reminded her of skinny inferi, eyes devoid of life, hungry and weary. Other people began to filter out of the nearby buildings to watch the spectacle, their desire for vengeance stronger than their fear.

Something nagged at her subconscious, and it wouldn’t let up. She twisted to view Blaise among the row of men. He didn’t struggle against his bonds like the others. Nor did he beg. He only glared as if trying to think his way out of the situation.

She glared right back, deciding something. “Keep Zabini bound, Draco, but take him down.”

“What do you plan to do with him?”

“I’m not sure.” Her instincts told her he’d be useful for something more. And until that changed, he’d live.

Draco didn’t question her further. At least, not in front of the others. By the time he’d dragged Blaise back down the platform, Colin pointed his camera at her.

Hermione released the silencios. Her two remaining prisoners groaned and threatened and begged, but she ignored them.

“The recording will start in three—”

She searched the faces of the crowd, landing again on Charlie. Despite his previous irritation, he broke into a grin, giving a nod in her direction, placing his wand to his chest.

“Two.”

After this, there'd be no turning back. The men behind her weren't average prisoners. Rosier Sr. was an influential patriarch, an original Death Eater, his son a prominent member of society. And Pucey was an heir to an old family line— an invaluable thing in this world

“One.”

There might never be another offer of mercy after this again.

“Go!” Colin shouted.

Hermione transitioned her gaze into the center of the lens.

“I have a message for the Butcher of Manchester and to all the wizards who support him,” she said in a firm voice, locking her emotions into the void. “Today, I find Rosier and Pucey guilty of the crimes of rape, murder, and human trafficking, and I plan to give them just as much *mercy* as you've shown to the muggles.” She stepped forward, avoiding the severed finger. “From this day forward, I will respond blood for blood. Life for life.”

She raised both hands, intending to curse them simultaneously as Dumbledore taught her.

“Before I tell you what this is, Butcher, I'm going to tell you what this is *not*.”

With a flick of her fingers up, Rosier and Pucey stood rigid, as if she'd attached a string to their heads like puppets, lengthening their spines.

“This is *not* a negotiation.”

Hermione raised her wrists, and the Death Eaters hovered in the sky. She didn't look behind her to see the expressions on the purebloods' faces, but she could imagine them: terror, despair, possibly even a foolish hope for a rescue.

“This is *not* misbehaviour.”

She drew an X into the air, marking the purebloods with the same glowing red symbol on their foreheads that Titus favoured.

“This is *not* terrorism.”

Hermione tightened her fists and then whispered an incendio. The red curse sparked from her hands.

The men burst into flames behind her. She didn't turn to watch the deaths, as they writhed and bellowed in agony. The intense heat sizzled against her skin, the fires turning the night sky a hazy orange. The air reeked of charred flesh, a scent almost worse than the rotting corpses, but she didn't cover her mouth or move away from the uncomfortable temperature.

She slid into the void of her mind until the screams ceased, until she was sure that nothing was left of Rosier Sr. and Pucey besides ash and bones. Only then did she release the flames

and allow their smoking remnants to clatter against the platform.

Hermione kept her gaze firmly on the camera, staring straight into Titus Nott's soul, speaking in the only language a man fed on violence could understand.

“This is war.”

## Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warnings: graphic depictions of violence, death, dubcon (in a dream scene)

Bonus Song Suggestion: Heilung- “Krigsgaldr” (I got the title of the chapter from the lyrics of this song)

Works inspired by this one

[In the Study](#) by [MyPrivateInsanity](#)

[A \(bad\) night in the life of Theodore Nott](#) by [PurpleLicorice](#)

[Nott Giving Into Temptation](#) by [Highreeve2022](#)

[Restricted Work] by [Ada\\_P\\_Rix \(orphan\\_account\)](#), [Rijaya83](#)

[You're toxic, I'm slipping under](#) by [Pandacorn0312](#)

[Без Вселенной / Without the Universe](#) by [Lunareees](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!