

Interhouse Unity

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Interhouse Unity

by [Beforetherealbook](#)

Summary

When Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy both show up as student teachers at Hogwarts, they quickly realize their assumptions about each other are old news. Over the course of the year, they grow closer together. Before long Draco finds himself plotting to get into Hermione Granger's knickers -- and dreaming of so many other things.

This is a light and fluffy, romantic smutfic with a little dom/sub and some sexual exploration in later chapters.

Because who doesn't like an emotionally mature Draco and a magically proficient Hermione?

****2024 Reddit Dramione Top Fics****

Best Coworker Fics (Top 10)

Notes

► Posting, Binding, and Anti-AI Policy

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

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: [Interhouse Unity | Tradução](#) by [ficsbystar](#)

Chapter 1: Hogwarts

Hermione

“Here, Hermione, take this,” said Harry quietly, as he pulled her in for a hug at her farewell brunch at the Burrow.

“Harry, what...?” she started, but she felt him shove something in her hand, and when she broke away she looked down to see the familiar, yellowed piece of parchment that she knew contained the Marauder’s Map.

“You’re giving me the Map?” she asked in amazement.

Harry just grinned. “Imagine what kind of power you will be able to wield over your students with this thing.”

Ron had sidled up to them as Harry said this, and he glanced down at the parchment Hermione was holding.

“Bloody hell mate, is that really a good idea?”

Hermione felt a small lurch of annoyance at this. She and Ron were still very good friends of course, but she had learned the hard way that a breakup could change things permanently, even if that breakup had happened years ago and both people had moved on.

“Hermione needs to make a name for herself,” said Harry with a nod. “She’s following in McGonagall’s footsteps. You know McGonagall always seemed to have eyes in the back of her head. Besides, this way she can do teacher patrols without ever having to leave her quarters.”

Even Ron grinned at this. “Fair enough. But don’t tell George, he would never forgive you.”

“Thanks Harry,” said Hermione, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “I promise I will put it to good use and not allow it to go to my head.”

Harry just gave her one last grin before moving off to find Ginny. Hermione watched him go with a small smile before turning to Ron.

“Well Ronald? I guess I’ll be seeing you at Christmas then,” she said.

Ron’s mouth thinned a little at this and said, “Right. We’ve done that before.”

Hermione internally winced. They *had* done that before, and while it wasn’t the only reason they had broken up it was certainly the biggest. She had opted to return to Hogwarts for her eighth year and Ron did not. Their relationship did not survive the distance. He wasn’t bitter

about it, exactly, but it was still a bit of a sore point between them, even several years later. He seemed to pull himself together though, and he pressed forward.

“Keep in touch and let us know how it goes for you. We all know you’ll be brilliant.”

Hermione gave him a grateful smile before saying goodbye to the others. She cast one final, fond glance around the crowded Weasley kitchen, taking in the sights. Everybody but her was coupled up: Harry and Ginny who had just gotten engaged, Ron and Lavender, Percy and his new girlfriend Audrey, George and his very pregnant wife Angelina, Bill and an even more pregnant Fleur with their toddler Victoire, and even Charley had surprised them by showing up with his new boyfriend named Daniel. They worked on the dragon preserve together, and Hermione thought they were a lovely couple, though it forever killed Mrs. Weasley’s dreams of Hermione joining the family permanently. Ever since Hermione and Ron broke up and made it clear to the rest of the family that it wasn’t happening, Mrs. Weasley had been trying to not-so-subtly set Hermione up with her second son.

Yes, everybody but her had a spouse or fiancé or serious relationship. Everybody but her had somebody waiting for them at home. Hermione did not, but what she did have was an incredible education and an amazing job opportunity thanks to her former Head of House: Hermione was officially joining the staff of Hogwarts as a student teacher before taking over the role of Transfiguration Professor permanently the following academic year.

As an almost-twenty-two-year-old witch, Hermione knew it was an incredible chance, and she would be foolish not to take it. And in any event, she had been working toward it ever since Professor McGonagall approached her the summer before her eighth year at Hogwarts, just after the war ended. Professor McGonagall explained that with Dumbledore and now Snape both dead, the Hogwarts Board of Governors was appointing her as Interim Headmistress, with the appointment to be finalized once she found a Transfiguration Professor to take over the course for her. The problem, unsurprisingly, was that between the war and the disrupted education at Hogwarts from the prior year, qualified applicants were thin on the ground. Professor McGonagall proposed that Hermione train to be her successor, with the understanding that she would complete her final year at Hogwarts, then spend two years in specialized training with Professor McGonagall personally as an apprentice. Upon completion of that, Hermione would officially join the staff as a student teacher for one year while Professor McGonagall transitioned toward a more administrative role, and then finally she could take over as a fully qualified professor, and Professor McGonagall would move into her role as Headmistress full-time.

The Board of Governors had not been terribly thrilled with the plan, as it would take a full four years to complete. However, with no other real alternative and the promise of the Golden Girl joining the staff of Hogwarts at the end, they eventually agreed to it, and Hermione threw herself into her work.

She had exceeded even Professor McGonagall’s expectations, with one of the highest scoring Transfiguration NEWTs on record, and during her two-year apprenticeship with Professor McGonagall she trained to become a registered animagus, among other things. Just like Professor McGonagall, Hermione could now turn herself into a cat, though she was a solid black one with hazel eyes. Between that and the Marauder’s Map Harry had just given her,

Hermione knew that the rule-breaking students of Hogwarts wouldn't stand a chance with Professor Granger on the case. She would never be seen in the shadows of Hogwarts.

Yes, Hermione was excited for this new opportunity, and she would never trade it for the world. But as she looked around the Burrow for the last time, she couldn't help but feel a bit lonely that this was to be her fate. While there was no *rule* that the staff at Hogwarts be single, many of them ended up that way just by happenstance, based largely on the fact that the four Heads of House had to live on campus while school was in session, and many other professors opted to do so as well as a matter of convenience. Spouses weren't allowed to live on campus unless they taught there too, so Hogwarts had become the landing place for many a single academic.

Hermione herself had lived with Harry at Grimmauld Place during her apprenticeship, but now that she was moving into her role as student teacher, she had chosen to go ahead and move back to Hogwarts and into the teachers' quarters to be with the rest of the staff. She might as well get used to it.

As far as Hermione knew, not a single professor at Hogwarts was currently married, though according to *Hogwarts, A History*, this wasn't always the case. The professors who were not Heads of House could technically live off-campus and floo in each day, so every once in awhile a married professor did cross the threshold. Still, it was rare, and Hermione had known when she accepted the plan that her job would pose problems for her in the romance department long-term. While she wouldn't be a Head of House this year, Professor McGonagall planned to pass it to her the following year once Hermione had completed her student teaching, and then Hermione would be *required* to live on campus whenever school was in session in case any Gryffindors needed her at night. When she accepted Professor McGonagall's proposal initially, she had rather optimistically hoped that she and Ron would be able to make a go of it, perhaps with him moving to Hogsmeade to be nearby. But that had never worked out, and she hadn't dated anybody else seriously during those two years she spent apprenticing with Professor McGonagall.

So here she was: off to Hogwarts, without a boyfriend, and high odds of decades of spinsterhood ahead of her.

It will be fine, she told herself. *My studies and my students will be enough.*

And it was true, she thought. Really, it *would* be fine. She would have the other professors for company and Professor McGonagall especially. More than anybody else, Hermione had grown unexpectedly close to Professor McGonagall in the years following the war, and their teacher-student relationship had grown into something that resembled more mother-daughter by the end of it. It would be wonderful to be so close to her mentor, and it wasn't like she was *trapped* in the castle year-round. She could still leave its premises on the weekends and during school breaks in the unlikely event she ever did meet someone she wanted to date. And if she didn't, she wouldn't complain about it. Professor McGonagall had seemed content with her lot in life, and Hermione would be too. She didn't need a boyfriend to be happy.

Hermione took one last glance back before throwing floo powder into the fireplace and stepping in with her trunk.

“Hogwarts, Headmistress’s office!” she cried, and she felt herself spinning along the familiar journey to Hogwarts that she had been taking for the last two years.

When she arrived she stepped out smartly onto the rug.

“Hermione, so lovely to see you,” said Professor McGonagall as she looked up.

“Thank you, Professor, I’m excited to be here.”

Her mentor gave her a small smile. “Well, first thing’s first. You are now a member of staff, so you must address me as Minerva. I believe we are all equal here, and there is no need for formality now that I am no longer your professor.”

Hermione’s eyes widened, but then she gave Profess... no, *Minerva*, a broad smile.

“That may take some practice... Minerva. But I will try.”

“Very good,” she said. “I insist that all the staff call each other by their first names in our quarters and in staff meetings. We do use last names in front of the students of course, but we see each other so much outside of class that I feel it really helps us all be congenial with one another if we can use first names in private.”

Hermione nodded, now wondering why Minerva was emphasizing this so much, but Hermione certainly wasn’t going to question it.

“Very well. And I trust that you will be cordial and professional with other members of the staff at all times, especially in front of the students. We may have personal differences with each other now and then, but conflicts must be worked out privately so as to not disrupt the learning environment.”

Hermione just stared now, hearing the not-so-subtle warning between her words. Hermione thought quickly about who on staff Minerva must be referring to. “Of course, Minerva. I will be professional and cordial with Professor Trelawney. Please don’t worry about that.”

“It’s Sybill,” said Minerva with a slight smile before she turned serious again. “But very well. And if you experience excessive rudeness or conflict with any other member of the staff you may report it to me. I will not tolerate it.”

“Yes of course,” said Hermione, mentally telling herself that Trelawney’s comments about Hermione’s clouded inner eye would *not* rise to the level of “excess conflict” that would warrant reporting it to Minerva.

Deal with it Hermione. You’re about a thousand times smarter than she is.

“Rest assured I will be communicating this with all members of staff, both new and returning,” she said.

“New?” asked Hermione curiously. “Other than me you mean?”

Now Minerva gave her another small smile. “You will see in due course. I imagine everyone will be at the feast tonight. Now then, why don’t you go make yourself at home? While I certainly can’t play favorites in any official capacity, I will say that you have arrived first and therefore you can have first pick of rooms among our new staff.”

Hermione was a bit amused by this. She had arrived exactly on time, which meant Minerva had arranged it that way. Still, she wasn’t complaining. Minerva had informed her in her official offer letter that room accommodations would be fixed, with future moves only permitted as staff turned over or the occasion warranted it. Given the very low turnover rate at Hogwarts, Hermione knew her room choice would be permanent until further notice.

“That sounds great. Will you be showing me, or...?”

“Fender!” called Minerva, and a small house elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

Hermione was bemused by the name, wondering if anybody but her picked up on the muggle reference.

“Fender, please show Professor Granger to the staff quarters and the available rooms for her choice.”

“Of course, Headmistress!” squeaked the little elf, and he — for Hermione thought Fender was probably a he — snapped his fingers and Hermione’s trunk lifted off the ground, and Fender levitated it for her, as he lead her out of Minerva’s office and down the adjoining corridor to a door that was immediately adjacent to the staff room.

“Interhouse unity!” squeaked the little elf, and the door swung open, as Hermione stepped in to find a truly luxurious common area decked out in the colors of all four houses.

“Tis the staff common room, Professor,” said Fender. “The door there goes to the staff lounge, which is where staff meetings are held and which students can get into. But no students are permitted in the staff common room.”

Hermione nodded at this, noting that the staff common room had several large tables, some comfortable chairs, and even a rather elaborate bar area with drinks and snacks.

“If you is having any beverage or snack preferences we can provide it Professor,” said the little elf. “We is also serving meals privately here or in your room if you is preferring not to eat with the students.”

“Oh I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” said Hermione.

“Professor must suits herself,” said Fender. “But if you is needing a meal at off times you has only to call Fender, and one will be provided.”

“Thank you, Fender.”

“I is showing you the rooms now Professor,” said the elf, and he led Hermione down a corridor with a series of doors along both walls.

“The available rooms are at the end here Professor,” said Fender, and he showed Hermione three doors all in a row.

Curious now, Hermione opened the first door and wasn’t terribly surprised to find a much larger space behind the door than the hallway suggested. It reminded her a bit of the tent she had camped in with Harry and Ron: it looked like a normal muggle tent from the outside but the inside was rather cavernous.

Sure enough, Hermione saw a large, handsomely appointed room with a four poster bed, window seat, and large desk and bookcase near a sitting area with a small fireplace. The windows looked out over the lawn, and there was even a small balcony through a pair of glass doors. She saw the room had an attached en suite bath that was moderately sized and more than sufficient for one person.

Hermione smiled to herself, thinking that she truly would never need to leave, as Fender led her to the room next to it, which appeared to be nearly identical to the first.

Then he led her to the third room, on the very end, and Hermione let out a small gasp when she went inside.

It wasn’t quite as large as the other two rooms, but unlike the other two it must have been in the corner of the castle. The windows wrapped around two sides, giving her a spectacular and unobstructed view of the lawn and lake, with the mountains in the background. The balcony for this room also wrapped around on both sides, making it easily twice as large as the balcony for the other two rooms.

She looked around the room and saw there was still a bookcase and desk, though it was a bit smaller than the other two rooms. The sitting area and fireplace was the same size though, and that was the thing that Hermione cared about. Hermione eyed her trunk and knew the smaller desk and bookshelves wouldn’t be a problem. She had cast an undetectable extension charm on her trunk and had unlimited amount of space for her things. Besides, she had always preferred to study in the common room when she was a student at Hogwarts. She could always make use of one of the large tables there if she really needed to spread out.

The bathroom, surprisingly, was actually a bit larger than the other two rooms and featured a separate tub and makeup vanity in addition to the standalone shower and sink. It also seemed distinctly feminine, compared to the other two bathrooms she had seen.

“This one, Fender,” said Hermione, already in love with her new room.

Fender wiggled his ears. “Headmistress thought you would pick this one. Please let Fender know if you need assistance unpacking.”

“I’m fine, Fender, thank you. I’ll come down for the start of term feast.”

Fender nodded and disappeared with a *CRACK!* while Hermione looked around at her new home. Taking a deep breath she opened her trunk and started to get to work.

Draco

“You are the Malfoy heir! Your responsibility is to your family and the fortune! You are supposed to be getting married, producing your heir, and managing our holdings Draco, not throwing your life away like this!”

Draco Malfoy allowed his father’s words to wash over him as he stared at the small window of light just over his father’s shoulder.

In truth, Draco could hardly believe he was doing this himself, but then again, if the year of Ministry-mandated mind healing after the war had taught Draco anything it was that his father was a shit parent. Sure, he loved Draco in his own way, but love didn’t necessarily translate to quality parenting. Lucius had always done this: direct Draco, command Draco, plan Draco’s entire life for him, and place family burdens on Draco’s shoulders that should never have been his to deal with in the first place.

The year of mandatory mind healing - which had turned into two more years of voluntary mind healing - had given Draco some perspective on this. And after much consideration and discussion with his mind healer about it, Draco decided that an excellent use of the extensive Malfoy fortune would be to hire a quality solicitor, accountant, and financial advisor so that the Malfoy interests could be put on autopilot while Draco did something for himself for once. Sure, he still met with them now and then to stay in the loop, but he found they did an excellent job when left to their own devices. The Malfoy fortune and business interests were secure, and it allowed Draco to enjoy the fruits of his family’s fortune without being stuck in business meetings and greasing palms for the rest of his adult life.

Work smarter, not harder.

Of course, he had never informed his father of this — not that his father could have stopped Draco if he wanted to. Lucius was three years into a twenty-five year Azkaban sentence. Given the length of time of his sentence, he had turned everything over to Draco to control once his sentence commenced. Draco, in a rare show of strength against his father, had accepted it but only on the condition it would become irrevocable. Lucius wouldn’t be getting control back if he ever made it out of Azkaban before he died. Lucius hadn’t been thrilled with this arrangement, but he couldn’t adequately manage the fortune while in prison. He had had no choice except to cede control over to Draco under Draco’s terms, and then Draco had proceeded to run things his own way and largely cut his father out of it.

Still, the fact that Draco was moving to Hogwarts this afternoon would probably make the papers, so Draco thought it was finally time to tell Lucius what he had really been doing for the past three years. He didn’t fancy getting a howler at Hogwarts if Lucius read it in *The Daily Prophet* first. His father, rather unfortunately, had negotiated delivery of the paper on a daily basis as part of his plea deal with the Ministry. He wanted to keep an eye on things, even if he couldn’t do anything about them.

“Potions!” shouted Lucius. “*Potions!*”

Another five minutes of this, and he'll be frothing at the mouth, thought Draco a bit dispassionately.

“No Malfoy has *ever* done something so mundane! A *teacher*? You must be joking Draco!”

Again Draco said nothing as his father's rant continued. Sure enough, he worked himself up into a fervor, and soon the spit was flying as his eyes bulged.

Huh. That only took three minutes, thought Draco with some mild interest.

He glanced at his watch.

“Time's up, I must be going,” said Draco as he turned around.

“DON'T YOU TURN YOUR BACK ON ME YOU UNGRATEFUL...”

But Lucius's shouts were fading now as Draco made his way back through the security checkpoint with the Azkaban guard. He said nothing as he picked up his wand at the exit and stepped out onto the gray courtyard, the wind whipping at his robes as he walked toward the dock and boarded the creaky boat with a grimace. Twenty minutes and a rather unfortunate amount of nausea later, Draco had left the island with Azkaban behind him, and not for the first time he felt a bit like he was being reborn as he stepped off the boat and back into the sunlight of the harbor on the other side of the small sea. Azkaban and its surrounding waters were perpetually gray and cold, even on a glorious day such as this.

He thanked the boatman and then turned on the spot, apparating back to Wiltshire, where he stared up at Malfoy Manor with another grimace. Sighing to himself, he waved his hand at the gate and strode up the lane, until he reached the front doors, which opened for him.

“Sully!” he said, and immediately a small house elf appeared.

“Yes, Master!”

“Sully, I'll be leaving for Hogwarts in a moment. How is Mother?”

“Mistress has taken to her bed, sir. She is not feeling well.”

Ah yes. The shock of my new job was too much for her to bear. Classic Narcissa.

“Should I call a healer?” he asked a bit wryly.

“No Master, Sully does not believe so. Sully thinks she will be revived in good time.”

“Very well, please keep an eye on her. If she doesn't send a letter to me by tomorrow morning, please call a healer.”

“Very good sir,” said the little elf.

“Excellent, please collect my trunk, and I’ll be off in a moment.”

The elf disappeared with a *CRACK!* and reappeared a moment later with a handsome trunk, monogrammed with Draco’s initials. The elf levitated it for him to the fireplace, and Draco grabbed it as he threw some powder into the fireplace and stepped into the floo. A moment later he was staring at Minerva McGonagall.

“Draco,” she said, nodding her head.

“Professor,” he replied.

“Please, you will call me Minerva. As I have already told our other new staff members, we go by first names when speaking to each other to build camaraderie. Last names are reserved for students.”

Draco shifted a little uncomfortably but said, “Very well... Minerva.”

“Very good. And as you and I have previously had extensive discussions about expectations and conduct, I feel there is nothing more for us to say at the moment. I need to be heading to the start of term feast shortly. Fender!”

A little elf appeared at her call.

“Please direct Professor Malfoy to his quarters.”

The elf bobbed and motioned Draco to follow. The elf led him down the hall to a door Draco had never entered before, and he was surprised to see a large, but handsome common room before the elf led him down an adjacent hall toward a door near the very end.

“This is your room, sir!” he said, and Draco opened the door a bit curiously. He was surprised, but not displeased, to find a room even larger than the one that was his at Malfoy Manor. The four poster bed was made out of mahogany, and the large desk and bookcase made Draco sigh in relief. He would be able to work in his room and wouldn’t be forced to use the common room tables. The attached en suite bathroom was smaller than he had at home, but perfectly sufficient, and in any event he wouldn’t have to share. That was an unexpected perk, given the way the student dorms were arranged.

“Sir is the last professor to arrive!” said Fender. “The start of term feast will begin in a few minutes. Sir should go down, and Fender will unpack Sir’s things.”

Draco looked at the elf curiously.

“Fender has met Sully sir,” he explained. “Sully explained that Sir prefers elf help with this task.”

“Ah,” said Draco. “In that case, did Sully mention...”

“Yes sir,” said Fender. “Though we do not need to bring one in for you, sir. The house elves repaired the Room of Requirement last year, and it should serve your needs sir.”

“The Room of Requirement?” he asked curiously.

“Sir may know it as the Room of Hidden Things.”

Draco stilled, as he felt his stomach clench at this. Now he knew exactly what Fender was talking about.

“There’s one in the Room of Hidden Things?” he said carefully. “I don’t recall seeing one in there.”

“Ah, not necessarily, sir. But the Room does not always take that shape. Tis why house elves call it the Room of Requirement or the Come and Go Room. Sir simply has to ask the Room for whatever he wants when he calls it.”

Draco blinked. He had never tried to make the Room be anything but the place with the Vanishing Cabinet, where he spent most of sixth year repairing it. But it sounded like the Room didn’t necessarily show itself the same way each time. Draco felt his stomach unclench a little.

“Very well, thank you Fender. I’ll try it soon and let you know if it’s suitable.”

Fender nodded and then shoo’d Draco out to the start of term feast. Draco exhaled and steeled himself for this.

This will be the worst night, he told himself. They’ll all be surprised, but it will get better from here.

He wasn’t expecting a terribly warm welcome. Minerva had made that clear. But despite that, when Horace Slughorn told Draco it was high time he return to his retirement, Draco couldn’t help but agree to come on board as a student teacher. He was desperate to escape the Manor and do something different with his life than what his parents had planned for him. He had signed a two-year, binding magical contract: one year to student teach and another year to actually teach. He and Minerva had agreed that they would assess at the end of the first year, and if it wasn’t going well, they would bring in another student teacher to train under Draco for his second year, and they would part ways from there.

I can do anything for two years.

And he could. He had lived with the Dark Lord in his home for two years. If he could survive that, he could surely survive being the least popular professor at Hogwarts for two years if the students and staff really didn’t like him. That would be child’s play by comparison. And after the initial shock wore off, the students and staff would surely get used to it to some degree, even if he wasn’t terribly popular. They would have to. Besides, nearly anything was better than being stuck in the Manor with his mother’s histrionics and matchmaking schemes.

After the shock of war ended, Draco found it was an oddly lonely existence being the heir to an old title and the head of a vast family fortune. Over the years even sex had lost much of its appeal as it became increasingly clear to Draco that the only thing others wanted from him

was money and social standing. Perhaps at Hogwarts he would find somebody to talk to. And if not, his students would be forced to interact with him. He may not be a favorite at Hogwarts, but he also wouldn't be stuck in a large house by himself with only his mother and Horace Slughorn for company. Besides, his mind healer thought it was a great way to combat Draco's loneliness. And over the years Draco had learned to listen to his mind healer.

Shaking himself out of it, Draco strode out of his room, through the still-empty staff common room and out into the hallway, which was helpfully close to the Great Hall. He took another deep breath and opened the door, as hundreds of heads turned to stare at him. The upperclass students had all arrived, though thankfully he hadn't missed the sorting. He realized the staff table was nearly full, though Professor Flitwick was missing, presumably to bring the first year students into the Great Hall at any moment.

It was now that he scanned the staff table for an empty seat, and his eyes landed on the only seat available. It was in between Professor Slughorn and...

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Hermione fucking Granger was staring at him like she had just been petrified by a basilisk. And to be fair to Draco, he knew what she looked like when she was petrified by a basilisk, having seen her that way in the hospital wing during second year. The similarity in her expression from then and now was truly astonishing.

He swallowed and didn't say anything, as he walked briskly over and sank down into the chair before staring at his plate. He felt her stiffen next to him, but she pointedly turned away and started chatting determinedly to the person on the other side of her, which Draco now saw was Neville Longbottom.

Fucking Longbottom too? Goddammit.

Draco had had several meetings with Minerva about "conduct" and "appropriate behavior," but he assumed it was just the whole ex-Death Eater thing. But no, *this* was why she felt the need to lecture him extensively before offering him the student teaching job. He was going to be living and working with one-third of the Golden Trio and their second-in-command Longbottom.

Fuck my life.

That two year magical contract was suddenly feeling rather longer than it had just moments ago. But then he thought about his mother's last round of attempted matchmaking that resulted in Draco locking himself in his room for three days, and he gritted his teeth. Even two years with Granger and Longbottom would be better than *that*. Besides, they had all attended Hogwarts together during eighth year, and they managed to get through the entire year without saying a single word to each other. Surely he could do the same thing this time, or mostly at any rate. Any interactions he was forced to have with them, and with Granger in particular, would be strictly professional.

Silence fell as the first years made their way into the Great Hall. Draco barely listened as they were sorted, still uncomfortably aware of Granger sitting next to him.

Out of the corner of his eye he studied her. She was shorter than he remembered, or perhaps he had just gotten taller in the two years since he had last seen her. Her hair, which had always been so bushy, appeared to be tamed into ringlets and was cut shorter than he had ever seen before. Her skin was still that same light caramel color. She had always been able to hold a tan better than most of the pureblood girls, which was something that they criticized her for in the Slytherin common room over the years. But though Draco would never admit it out loud, he had always thought her skin gave her a healthy color. She looked like she lived in the sun. He caught the slightest whiff of something flowery and citrusy as she clapped for the student who had just been sorted and adjusted in her chair, and Draco automatically closed his eyes to catalog the scent.

Definitely verbena and grapefruit. Maybe jasmine and... amber.

To Draco's sensitive nose, which had been further trained during his potions mastery, it smelled nothing short of incredible. He shook himself out of it as Minerva stood to give the start of term speech. Draco tuned her out until she got to the relevant introductions.

"...and I am pleased to announce that we have two student teachers this year, as well as an apprentice who we expect will move into a student teaching role next year. Each of our student teachers and future student teacher are here to train as part of a long-term succession plan to enable the retirement and advancement of current teachers. First, we have Neville Longbottom, who has decided to complete his final year of his Herbology apprenticeship in residence here at Hogwarts, with Professor Sprout."

There was a smattering of applause at this, and then McGonagall continued. "Next, taking on the role of student teacher for Transfiguration is Professor Hermione Granger."

The room erupted at this, though Draco noted that quite a few Slytherins were whispering, with dissatisfied expressions on their faces.

"Yes, thank you. Professor Granger will be student teaching with me and next year will be the Transfiguration Professor full time while I move into the role of Headmistress."

Another round of applause, and then Draco's stomach tensed.

"And finally, we have Professor Draco Malfoy, who will be student teaching in Potions and will be moving to the role of Potions Professor next year after Professor Slughorn returns to his retirement."

Immediately the Great Hall broke out with whispers and muttering, and Draco just forced himself to stare straight ahead.

"And I should add that Professor Malfoy has also agreed to teach flying to the first years and serve as referee for the interhouse quidditch matches. As you may have heard, Madame Hooch had an unfortunate fall just before the start of term that resulted in her early retirement."

At this, there were horrified gasps from three of the four tables, though the Slytherins started to cheer. Draco felt his mouth twitch. He had no intention of favoring Slytherin House in quidditch, but he was sure they wouldn't believe it until he had gotten through the entire season.

Minerva then clapped her hands and the feast appeared. Draco helped himself to some food and managed to make it through the entire dinner without saying a single word to Granger or Longbottom and only talking minimally to Horace.

Eventually, the feast began to wind down, and Granger suddenly stood, so Draco automatically stood too.

She turned to look at him squarely now, apparently startled by what he had just done, and silver eyes met hazel.

No, not hazel, he realized. Gold. Her eyes are fucking gold.

She blinked, and he just raised an eyebrow, as she hurried off, that curiously wonderful scent wafting his way once more as she passed him. Draco glanced down and saw Longbottom staring at him in confusion. He barely resisted rolling his eyes.

Honestly, you would never know Longbottom is a pureblood with his shit manners.

Standing whenever a witch left the table was so instinctive for Draco that he did it unconsciously. He was *sure* Augusta Longbottom had made sure her grandson had received all the etiquette lessons too, but evidently they had not stuck.

Refusing to be embarrassed by the fact that he had been raised with actual manners, Draco sat back down again. He took a deep breath and then helped himself to one last serving of dessert before calling it himself and making his way back to his room.

As usual, Draco was feeling overly full and sleepy after the feast, and he was quite looking forward to having a lie-in in the morning. This was a rare year when the first of September fell on a Saturday so they would all get the following day off, or mostly at any rate. Minerva had scheduled a staff meeting, but it wasn't until the afternoon. He would have the whole morning free. Perhaps he would go flying.

Bolstered by this happy prospect, he quickly stripped down to his boxers, climbed into bed, and sank down into the mattress. He allowed his mind to wander and was just drifting off to sleep when he heard it.

A scream. A female scream. A very familiar female scream that he had heard in his own nightmares on and off for the past three years.

It was very faint, but it was there, coming through the wall on the other side of the room. He would recognize Hermione Granger's screams anywhere.

Without even registering what he was doing, Draco yanked the covers off and raced out of his room and into the hallway. He realized Granger had been assigned the room at the very end

of the hall, immediately next to his. Without thinking about it further he yanked her door open and rushed in, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw it was just a nightmare. She was still screaming, but clearly asleep, as she thrashed around in the sheets. Draco would have bet half his gold in Gringotts that he knew what she was dreaming about.

“Granger,” he said, moving toward her.

“Granger! GRANGER!”

He shook her, and she sat up with a gasp. With reflexes he could hardly believe, but that he knew were borne from war, she pulled her wand out from under her pillow and aimed it directly at his head as she breathed hard. Instinctively, Draco raised his hands in the air.

“I... *Malfoy?*”

Chapter 2: Cosmopolitan UK

Hermione

Hermione woke up from her normal nightmare to find herself pointing her wand at a nearly naked Draco Malfoy. He had both hands in the air, and even in the dark she could see the outlines of his old Dark Mark on his left forearm.

“I... *Malfoy?*”

He didn't say anything but just watched her warily.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“You were screaming. I'm next door.”

“I... oh. Shit. Sorry.” And Hermione lowered her wand and tossed it to the side as she closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. It had been her usual nightmare, but more realistic than she was accustomed to.

He seemed to take a deep breath and lowered his hands too. “I rather think I'm the last person you should apologize to for that particular nightmare.”

She opened her eyes and stared at him.

“And I rather think that all of the adults who were in the room that day were more responsible for it than you were.”

He blinked and furrowed his brow.

“You sound like my mind healer,” he said.

Now Hermione blinked. “You see a mind healer?”

He shrugged, looking a bit uncomfortable. “Sure. The Ministry decided to reverse some of the brain washing from my dear old dad.”

She cocked her head to the side to study him. She was almost certain Malfoy's mind healer was only required for the first year after he was sentenced. Perhaps she was wrong about that, but it was easy enough to check.

“So is that why you came in to wake me up? Something your mind healer said?”

To her surprise he looked at her squarely and just raised an eyebrow.

“I was just making sure that bitch Bellatrix hadn’t come back from the dead like some fucking inferius.”

Hermione let out a surprised laugh at this. “Fair enough. She’d be the type.”

She saw the ghost of a smirk on his face as he turned around to walk away. “Take it easy Granger.”

“Hermione,” she said.

He came to a halt at the door and turned back around to look at her questioningly.

“Minerva says you’re supposed to call me Hermione in private.”

Now a full blown Malfoy smirk crossed his face. “Am I now? I’ll take it under consideration, Granger.”

He let himself out and shut the door behind him as Hermione collapsed back onto the pillow, no longer even remotely tired.

Draco sodding Malfoy.

If she had been asked to make a list of all of her former classmates ranked in order from top to bottom based on who was most likely to show up at Hogwarts to teach, Draco Malfoy would have been dead last.

OK, maybe Crabbe and Goyle would have been dead last. But Malfoy would have been third from the bottom.

She had no idea what he was doing here. Sure, he was incredibly talented in potions. She had always known that. He had scored even higher than she did on their Potions NEWT, much to her chagrin.

But only because I was so focused on Transfiguration, and I still came in second.

Merlin, she was ridiculous to still be holding onto that. It had rankled though, when she found out that she had come second to *Malfoy* of all people.

And now here he was, her childhood bully, student teaching at Hogwarts to take over for Slughorn and presumably Slytherin House next year. Slughorn and Malfoy were the only Slytherins on staff, and while a Head of House didn’t *have* to be from that House themselves, it was tradition. The students liked it. It made them trust their Heads, and so for most of Hogwarts’ history the Heads of House had been part of that House when they were students too, except for the rare times when a House wasn’t represented at all by a member of the staff. So just like Hermione, Draco Malfoy had evidently chosen to leave his regular life to come teach and live in the staff quarters at Hogwarts during the school year indefinitely, instead of his family’s estate.

It made absolutely no sense.

Hermione had been thrilled to learn that Neville was here too when she saw him at the start of term feast. She hadn't stayed in touch with him as much over the last couple of years, but as soon as she saw him she knew she would have a friend here. She thought he was the reason Minerva had been cagey about the other new staff members. She wanted Neville to be a surprise.

But then Malfoy strode through the doors of the Great Hall, and Hermione's world spun.

He was the reason for all of Minerva's warnings and caginess. It had nothing to do with Neville or that ridiculous Sibyll Trelawney. Minerva had known Hermione was going to have to interact with Malfoy for potentially years to come.

No wonder she didn't tell me. She probably thought I wouldn't sign my contract.

Hermione had signed a five-year contract with Hogwarts, though she intended to stay much longer than that. Still, she hadn't been expecting this.

Even more unexpected had been the fact that he sat next to her at dinner. Granted, there was no other seat available. But she would have expected him to turn around and just skip the feast instead of being forced to sit next to her. She could tell he was uncomfortable with it.

He hadn't said a single word to her, nor she to him. They had settled on some unspoken agreement not to interact with each other in eighth year, and it seemed they both knew that would spill over to teaching as well.

It had worked rather well at dinner, even though they were so close they were nearly touching elbows. Hermione had *never* spent that much time so close to Malfoy, not once. She had been close enough to see the muscles twitching in his jaw out of the corner of her eye during his lukewarm reception. And she has been close enough to smell a faint scent of cologne or aftershave and something else very masculine that made her practically lightheaded.

And then he had evidently ended up in the room next door to hers and came in to wake her up from a nightmare. Of course he had only done it because she had probably woken him up too with her screaming. But still, it had thrown her off that this was the first time they had spoken directly to each other in four years.

And of course he just had to look bloody hot while he was doing it.

Godric save me.

Hermione was absolutely kicking herself for those stray thoughts. Of course Malfoy was attractive. She had always been able to see that in a totally objective way, even when he had been an enormous pain in her arse during the earlier years at school. His features were striking with the white blonde hair, silver eyes, and chiseled face. But his personality had always been so foul she had never once really thought about it. His attractiveness was no different than some nameless bloke in a magazine. Perfectly good looking, a well-chosen model for Death Eater garb. Nice pose, glossy picture.

Of course, she hadn't seen him at all in the last two years, and they had avoided each other like the plague in the year before that. Then the year before *that* she was on the run hunting

horcruxes, and the year before *that* he was spending nearly all his free time in the Room of Requirement fixing the Vanishing Cabinet.

No, she hadn't gotten a really good, studied look at Malfoy since fifth year, when she might have noticed his quidditch gear fit him flawlessly, and she had accidentally run into him in the Prefect's bathroom that one time. The incident in the Prefect's bathroom was a one-off of course, and she was forced to hide when she realized he was in there and hadn't seen her. Of course she had to watch him from behind the enormous stack of towels. How else would she know when he was gone?

But the difference between a fifteen-year-old Malfoy in the Prefect's bath and a twenty-one-year old Malfoy talking to her in his boxers with no embarrassment about that fact whatsoever was nothing short of jarring. He had grown up, he had filled out, he looked like a man instead of a boy.

And the fact that she knew this having been at Hogwarts for less than twenty-four hours was totally unacceptable.

It was only now that Hermione looked down to see what *she* was wearing, and she grimaced: a muggle tank top and no bra. Lovely. At least he hadn't been able to see that she wasn't wearing trousers either. She grimaced.

Shit.

Alright, well unless she was prepared to obliviate him, she would just have to live with the mortification. She was sure Malfoy would go back to ignoring her now that he had obliquely reminded her to use silencing charms at night. She had simply gotten out of the habit while living at Grimmauld Place. After that little interaction, however, she wouldn't forget again.

With that final thought she reached for her wand and cast a silencing charm around her bed and threw it to the side again. She closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep. Many hours later, she finally drifted off.

Hermione woke up and turned over to look at her clock only to see it was a full hour later than she normally woke up.

She groaned and forced herself to roll over and sit up. It wasn't like she had anywhere to be this morning. It was a Sunday. But Hermione was a creature of habit, and Sundays had become her favorite day of the week over the past couple of years.

Yawning, she made herself stand up and putter to the bathroom where she started the shower. She sighed as the warm water poured over her, and she was feeling much more awake now as she quickly got dressed in her normal muggle clothes. She decided to leave her robes off.

Yes, it was a bit casual, but Hermione had talked to Minerva about this, and there was no real dress code for professors. Hermione was the only muggleborn staff member at Hogwarts. Even the Muggle Studies professor was a half-blood, with only one muggle parent, and she had been raised in the wizarding world.

Hermione knew she was a bit of a symbol, and while the entire premise of it annoyed her, she had decided to lean into it a little bit and not hide her muggle background. She thought it would help the muggleborn students, especially the very young ones, to have a role model who was like them. Transfiguration was known to be one of the hardest subjects at Hogwarts. It was a core subject, and nothing about it was easy. Having a muggleborn Transfiguration professor was practically unheard of, and Hermione intended to take advantage of the prestige of this position to show the next generation of students that muggleborns didn't have less magic than purebloods or half-bloods.

Hermione knew all too well how tempting it was for muggleborns to push everything muggle away once they joined the wizarding world. She had tried to do it herself for her first six years at Hogwarts in an effort to assimilate. But something about risking her life over and over again to save this world she was now a part of gave her some perspective. She had been a critical member of the Order of the Phoenix. She had helped Harry Potter win the war. She had nothing left to prove to anyone. And dammit, muggles simply *did* some things better than wizards. Clothing was one of them, as far as Hermione was concerned. In the years since the final battle, Hermione had found a better balance between her two worlds and openly embraced the things she liked about each.

So clad in jeans, a fitted black T-shirt, ballet flats, and rather nice muggle jewelry that Harry had gotten for her when the two of them had spent a day celebrating the end of the war in muggle London, Hermione made her way down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

She came to a halt as she looked at the staff table and considered her seating choices. She could sit on the very end next to Sibyll Trelawney. Hard pass. She could sit on the other end, next to Sharon Burton, the Muggle Studies Professor whom Hermione had met the day before and had been dismayed to learn knew almost nothing about muggles, despite the fact that her father was one. Professor Burton's muggle father, Hermione had learned, traveled extensively for his job and was rarely home with his wife and kids. So Professor Burton had been raised as a witch, though she felt her "breeding" made her qualified for the post. Another hard pass. Finally, she could sit between Draco Malfoy and Neville, just like the night before.

Hermione gave a resigned sigh as she headed toward the two young men. She supposed it meant something that she would rather sit next to Malfoy than either Trelawney or Burton, but she was too tired to contemplate it right now. She ignored the muttering from the students who had been watching her make up her mind about this seating choice. To her surprise, Malfoy stood as she arrived and then sat back down after she did.

"Hey Hermione!" said Neville brightly. "You're here a bit late. Rough night?"

Hermione was momentarily distracted by this, though she noticed Malfoy, who was reading *The Sunday Prophet*, had stilled to listen.

“How do you know I’m late?” Hermione asked with some consternation.

Neville turned crimson. “Just thinking about when we were at school. You would always come down to breakfast at the same time each day.”

Hermione gave him a tight smile. “Ah. Well, you know, it takes a few nights to get used to a new bed. I was up later than usual.”

For some reason this made Neville blush even deeper, but she ignored it as she turned to the coffee on the table.

The elixir of life, she thought as she surveyed the coffee and available add-ons. To her delight the house elves had provided all the things required to make a cafe mocha. She got to work mixing one up.

She realized both wizards were watching her now in confusion.

“Muggle thing. It’s delicious,” was all she said as an owl swooped toward her loaded down with her usual delivery of Sunday papers and reading materials: *The Sunday Prophet*, *The Sunday Times*, the previous day’s delivery of *The Economist*, *Cosmopolitan UK*, *British Vogue*, *Witch Weekly*, and Hermione’s personal favorite, *The New York Times*, *Sunday Edition*.

The first Sunday of the month was Hermione’s favorite day because everything came at once. She had a daily subscription to *The Daily Prophet* and *The Times*, but everything else was weekly or monthly. She held all of her weekly and monthly subscriptions at a post office box in London and had everything delivered to her at once on Sunday mornings.

She had started subscribing to muggle papers and magazines after the war, when it became clear that Grimmauld Place had too much magic for muggle television to work, much to her and Harry’s dismay. They had a place they could watch TV if they were really desperate, but it was largely unwarded, and after the war neither of them liked staying in a place without wards for too long. So she and Harry had settled on newspapers and magazines as their main source for news in the muggle world. It had taken some time to figure out how to do it, but eventually Hermione discovered that one of the main post centers in London serviced both muggle and wizard populations. She rented a box there, and it allowed them to get mail from the muggle world delivered to them in the wizarding world. She and Harry had both set up subscriptions to their favorite muggle media this way.

She tossed everything to the side except for *The New York Times*, which she opened to the puzzle section. She pulled a pen out of her bag and settled down to work on the crossword.

It was only now that she realized both Neville and Malfoy were staring at her.

“What?” she asked, looking up.

“Erm, what are all these?” asked Neville, gesturing to the newspapers and magazines.

“Magazines and newspapers,” said Hermione.

“But... is that muggle?”

She noticed Neville gesturing toward *Cosmopolitan UK*, with wide eyes. Half the cover was peeking out from the stack. Hermione pulled it out to look at it briefly. It featured a hot pink background with a blonde model in a purple dress. The headline read, “YOUR HOTTEST HOLIDAY SEX CONFESSIONS.”

“Oh yeah, it’s the August edition,” she said offhandedly, as she threw it back on top of the stack of other papers. “It takes a little extra time to get to me in the magical world.”

“But it’s... it’s...” said Neville awkwardly.

Hermione just rolled her eyes. “It’s one of my guilty pleasures, Neville. I’m sure I’ve earned one or two.”

This shut him up, and Hermione returned to her crossword puzzle in peace. She was just contemplating 14 Down (“Narcissist’s problem”), when she heard Malfoy’s voice.

“And what is *that*?”

He was staring at her pen.

“Oh honestly, it’s a muggle pen. They’re about a thousand times more convenient than quills and ink.”

She clicked it for him a couple times and then scribbled on the top corner of the paper. Both Neville and Malfoy looked like they were having some sort of revelation as they stared at it.

“Purebloods,” she muttered to herself.

"And the other thing?" asked Neville.

She saw he was now staring at *British Vogue*.

"Muggle fashion," she said simply.

Neville looked totally confused now.

"Oh honestly, I'm not obsessed with it like Lavender and Parvati always were, but I'm photographed every time the media sees me in public. You must know that. If I'm forced to represent muggleborns, then I'm going to dress like one. And before you ask, *The Economist*, *The Times*, and *The New York Times* are all for current events in the muggle world. And of course I read *The Daily Prophet* like most other adults in the wizarding world, and I have to subscribe to bloody *Witch Weekly* so I know what the hell they're printing about me."

Neville's eyes were wide after this speech. She felt a tad guilty for going off on him like that, but then again, this was another one of those pureblood versus muggleborn things that drove her crazy even if it wasn't poorly intentioned.

Both wizards left her alone for the rest of breakfast, but Hermione got the distinct impression that they were both watching her out of the corner of their eyes. Neville, she saw, turned scarlet every time he glanced at the cover of *Cosmopolitan*.

She just shook her head. She had learned that some aspects of the wizarding world were far more conservative than the muggle world. Their views on sex had always struck her as particularly odd. The contraception charm and potion both had a one hundred percent success rate when used properly, so there was no risk of children out of wedlock if the appropriate measures were taken. That meant that casual sex was very much part of the wizarding world. But despite that, sex wasn't something really *discussed* in public media or polite conversation except with one's closest friends. Wizards hadn't advanced that far, and to Hermione's knowledge there had been no real equivalent to the sexual revolution or feminist movements because the charm and potion were both hundreds of years old. Witches held jobs, certainly, but it was still considered a bit gauche, especially in wealthy pureblood circles. The potion and charm hadn't modernized witches in the same way that birth control modernized muggle women.

Hermione just shrugged to herself. She refused to be embarrassed about it. It *was* one of her guilty pleasures. It gave her some fodder for fantasies that she would surely never fulfill, especially now that she was at Hogwarts.

Hermione finished her coffee, gathered her papers and stood, and again, Malfoy stood too. She just threw him an amused look, and he raised an eyebrow back at her, evidently totally unabashed by this old-fashioned habit of his.

She moved out of the Great Hall, ready to settle in for plenty of reading until the staff meeting that afternoon.

Purebloods, she thought again, as she shook her head.

Draco

After Granger left the Great Hall, Draco hurried to finish his breakfast too before making his way back to his room to grab his broom and quidditch gear. As he walked through the staff lounge he noticed Granger ensconced in a chair near the fireplace, now reading one of her muggle magazines with interest. He just smirked to himself as he grabbed what he needed and headed back out. She didn't even look up.

As he kicked off from the ground, he had to admit she was different than he had expected when he laid eyes on her the first night. Hermione Granger had always been rather muggle, but as a child he sensed that she desperately wanted to fit into the magical world. He had been a bully, and he viewed her muggleness as her weakness. It embarrassed her, it set her apart, and it always made her stand out at Hogwarts in ways she didn't enjoy. So he had

latched onto it when he tormented her. He certainly wasn't proud of it as an adult, but it did make him rather aware of where she fell on the magical to muggle spectrum at any given time.

He realized how stupid and cruel he had been after fighting a literal war over blood purity and ending up on the wrong side of history for it. Muggleborns had just as much magic as purebloods. Granger herself was proof of that. And muggles may not be as advanced as wizards in everything, but even he had to acknowledge there were some things they did better than wizards.

For example, the muggle athletic clothing he was wearing to fly was something his mind healer had turned him onto. His mind healer, Healer Robinson, was himself a muggleborn and had once made a comment about how ridiculous it was to wear robes in the air.

"They're not aerodynamic at all. They catch the wind and slow you down. It's basic physics. Every muggleborn I know has commented on it at one point or another."

Reluctantly curious despite himself, Draco had inquired further, and Healer Robinson had explained how to change galleons into muggle money at Gringotts and then visit a muggle shop for athletic gear. He had even accompanied Draco on his first trip into muggle London, which counted as one of their sessions together for the Ministry. Draco had not been at all prepared for what he found there, but he had to admit that Healer Robinson was right. Muggle athletic clothing was superior to robes, at least for sports like quidditch. Draco had ventured into muggle London quite a few times since that first trip, though often Healer Robinson went with him.

But that observation by his mind healer and first trip into the muggle world was the reason Draco now flew wearing a muggle shirt and trousers that were fitted to him like a second skin, but made out of a fabric that was also incredibly breathable and stretchy. Sure enough, he flew faster and more precisely without the bulk of traditional quidditch robes to slow him down.

As for Granger, it appeared that she had finally embraced her muggleness and was no longer ashamed by it. Draco had to admit there was a certain appeal to see her finally come into her own in that way. He knew that a few years ago she never would have prepared coffee the muggle way or shown him a muggle pen and newspapers or dared arrive at breakfast wearing what he recognized as muggle jeans and a T-shirt. But Draco was very happy she had done all of it, especially the clothing.

Fuck me, but muggle fashion is hot.

He suspected his mother would have a fit of the vapors if she could hear the direction of Draco's thoughts, but it was true. This was another thing muggles did better than wizards. Muggle fashion was much more interesting, flattering, and revealing than wizarding fashion. He couldn't help but notice that Granger was wearing jeans that hugged her arse perfectly, and the neckline of her T-shirt cut a deep V down the front of her chest. Draco was tall enough that it struck him that if he angled his body in just the right way when he sat next to her, he might be able to see *down* into that V just a little bit. Sure enough, he caught the faintest glimpse of some rather tantalizing curves when he tried it.

He had to admit he had been curious about those curves ever since he saw her in that little number the night before. True, she had nearly hexed him, but once she put her wand away, his eyes were drawn to what she was wearing. It appeared to be a thin, cotton shirt with very skinny straps and no bra. Even in the moonlight he could see a faint outline of her nipples, and Draco had lain awake contemplating them for far longer than he cared to admit.

Salazar help me.

He was sure he had noticed only because he was very overdue for a shag. He had stopped sleeping around once it made it back to his mother, and she tried to use it against him by setting him up with the pureblood witches he had slept with. The witches themselves had participated enthusiastically, and it was that, more than anything, that made Draco realize he would never be more than his money and title to most people. Eventually he had tired of it, and so he had been in a dry spell for nearly a year now. He had acknowledged it, accepted it, and he knew that Hogwarts would probably extend it. He was tied here for at least two more years, and possibly even longer than that. He had decided it was worth it to get away from his parents and the duties they kept throwing into his face, even if it meant that casual shags wouldn't be as easy or frequent as they had once been.

The impetus to fulfill his duty to the title and sire an heir had been burned out of him by the war, and Draco didn't particularly care if he never married or had kids. And in any event, he was young. He was only twenty-one. If he did decide to do his duty by the title one day, there was plenty of time for him to have a mini career at Hogwarts first. His mother's insistence that he fulfill his duties *now* was completely ridiculous. Just because *she* had had Draco in her early twenties after a couple of years of trying didn't mean that he had to start now.

Still, the fact of the matter was, Draco was a red-blooded wizard, sleeping next door to a powerful little witch who had finally come into her own. It couldn't hurt to look at her and fantasize a little bit, especially when she made it so easy. It's not like anything would come of it, and they had evidently reached some sort of mutual understanding over the past day about how to interact with one another, much to Draco's relief. They could exchange a few words or eat a meal together without cursing each other. But it would never go farther than that.

Draco sighed as floated back to the ground. He had flown for longer than he intended and had just enough time to grab a bite to eat before the staff meeting.

Not bothering to take the time to change, Draco slung his broom over one shoulder and his bag over the other and made his way to the Great Hall. It was nearly devoid of staff, though he heard some muttering from the students who were lingering there as he walked in. He ignored them and grabbed a large sandwich from one of the platters just as the food was disappearing.

He wrapped it in a napkin and made his way toward the staff break room, where a conference table had been set up. He was relieved to see he wasn't the very last one to arrive this time, though as he looked around he saw that once again his choice of who to sit next to was rather limited.

Seeing a seat open next to Granger, he shrugged and made his way toward it. They had eaten together twice now, and they were the same age. It was pointless to try to avoid her, and as Healer Robinson was always telling him, he would never know what people actually thought of him now unless he put himself out there first and gave them a chance to show him. To his surprise, he had learned that Granger apparently liked him more than either Trelawney or Burton. She had made that clear this morning.

He walked over to her and dropped his bag near the chair next to her, as he leaned his broom against the wall nearby.

“Want something?” he asked as she looked up at him.

“Oh, erm, I’d take a butterbeer if you’re getting one anyway.”

He just nodded and put his sandwich on the table and then grabbed a couple butterbeers from the small bar the house elves had set up on the other side of the room.

He made his way back and silently set one down in front of her. She gave him a small smile of thanks. He saw Minerva watching him a bit warily, but she said nothing until everyone was seated.

“Very well then, let’s get started.”

Chapter 3: Blood

Hermione

Hermione knew she should be paying attention to Minerva. This was her very first full day as a student teacher and her very first staff meeting after all.

And Hermione *was* paying attention. She really was. She swore she was. It was just that Malfoy had walked in dressed so bizarrely that she did a double take.

She had been certain she would be the only staff member wearing muggle clothes to the staff meeting, and she had been correct until Malfoy showed up. Evidently he had just come from the quidditch pitch because he had a very expensive broom slung over his shoulder and was wearing quidditch leathers, which Hermione had always thought looked a bit like muggle chaps except they were made of thick dragonhide and tighter against the inner thighs and forearms. Malfoy's quidditch leathers, she saw, looked to be custom fit to him. But that wasn't what made her pause. It was the thing he was wearing underneath.

He looked to be wearing something that looked like a muggle cycling uniform. It was skin tight from top to bottom with long sleeves and trousers. As he walked to the bar to get them both a butterbeer and she eyed him more closely she saw that's exactly what it was. There was some suspicious padding around the arse area that confirmed it for her.

Not that she was checking out his arse. No, it was definitely Pomona Sprout who was doing that and not Hermione.

Yes, she was almost certain Malfoy was wearing a muggle cycling uniform under quidditch leathers, and he had just gotten off the pitch dressed like that. His blonde hair looked windswept, and when he sat down next to her she could smell that musky scent of male sweat and the outdoors under that same aftershave he apparently favored.

Hermione swallowed and forced herself to focus.

"... give detentions then you must be prepared to administer them, unless another professor agrees to substitute for you..."

Really, a muggle cycling uniform was rather brilliant. Cycling was the closest thing to riding brooms that muggles did, and the uniforms were made for speed and comfort. They were awfully aerodynamic, far more so than bloody robes for heaven's sake. She had always wondered why on earth wizards insisted on wearing robes for quidditch instead of something like that.

"... Heads of House for any serious issues or repeat offenders..."

But how had he discovered it? The notion that Draco Malfoy had gone shopping in the muggle world was too strange to even contemplate. Then again, very little about Draco Malfoy was adding up. The fact that he was at Hogwarts at all was still very odd to her. And

the cautious detente they had settled on over the last day was also very strange. This was the third time they had sat next to each other, and this time he even grabbed a butterbeer for her. Not that there was anything wrong with it, and in a way she was relieved by it. Evidently he had also realized they would have to learn how to manage with each other, given that they would be working and even living together for years to come. Still, it was so different from how he had ever treated her she didn't know what to make of it.

"... new clubs to promote interhouse unity and provide social engagement for the students...."

Then Malfoy stood to grab another butterbeer, and Hermione's train of thought went haywire.

Did he really have to stand to get another butterbeer? Honestly, half the female staff is looking at Malfoy's arse now instead of listening to Minerva. Sprout and Sinistra and good God, even Minerva herself just checked him out. OK, that's just wrong...

"... Hogsmeade visit the first weekend in October..."

Oh God and his front. Why are his quidditch leathers so tight around his crotch? It practically outlines his entire... let's call it a package. Was that really necessary Malfoy? Surely he won't dress like that when refereeing matches. The poor female quidditch players will probably faint right off of their brooms. Then it would only be wizards who could play, and only straight ones at that, and that's just sexist and totally against Hogwarts policy...

"... dismissed. Hermione, could I have a word?"

"Huh? Oh, of course Minerva," said Hermione as she shook herself out of it and stood to walk over to Minerva. Malfoy stood at the same time, and once again Hermione got that whiff of musk and aftershave. She grimaced.

"My office please, it will only take a moment."

Hermione nodded and followed Minerva out of the staff room, and she couldn't help but glance back at Malfoy as she left. She saw he was talking to Horace Slughorn, but he caught her eye on the way out, and he gave her a pained look that clearly said, *This is going to take forever.*

Hermione felt her lip twitch involuntarily as she moved out into the corridor and she walked the short distance to the stone gargoyle at the entrance to the Headmistress's office.

It jumped aside for Minerva, and together they made their way up the spiraling staircase, and Minerva gestured for Hermione to sit and take a ginger biscuit.

"Hermione, how are you settling in?" she asked.

"Perfectly well. My room is lovely."

Minerva gave her a small smile. "Yes, I rather thought you would like that one. It used to be mine, you know."

Hermione gave her a smile at this. She hadn't been sure about this, but she had suspected.

"And I've noticed that Draco Malfoy has been sitting with you at meals and of course at the staff meeting just now."

"Erm, yes," said Hermione.

"How has that been? I must confess I had my doubts."

Hermione bit her lip. "So far, fine. We haven't talked much, but we seem to have found some sort of neutral ground. Neither of us has been rude to the other."

Minerva looked relieved. "Good. He's exceptionally talented at Potions, and of course he's a Slytherin, which will solve a major issue when Horace retires at the end of the year. But of course his history..."

"Minerva, if I can ask, do you know why he wanted the job?"

Minerva sighed. "I really shouldn't say, but I got the impression he's eager to distance himself from his parents. The Malfoys have obviously taken steps to rehabilitate their public name since the war, but up until Horace and Draco approached me I rather thought it was all lip service. I'm still not certain Draco has moved past all of the prejudices of his family, even though he does donate rather generously to certain charities. But he did seem very eager to get some distance from his parents, so I'm hopeful he's truly seen the error of his ways. That being said, I'd like you to keep your eyes and ears open. I trust you far more than I trust him, and if you hear anything from him or from students to suggest he's still a blood supremacist, I'd like to know. The fact that he's willing to sit with you is encouraging. You will hear things I don't hear."

"You want me to spy on him then?" asked Hermione a bit uncomfortably.

"Not necessarily. I just ask you not to push him away as long as he is behaving tolerably well around you. I certainly hope that this new and improved Draco Malfoy is genuine, but only time will tell. If I need to begin recruiting a new Potions master, then I need as much notice as possible to do it. They are rather hard to find, you know."

"Yes of course," said Hermione quietly. She glanced at Minerva. "He was wearing muggle clothing today in the staff meeting you know."

Minerva stared at her. "Are you certain?"

Hermione nodded. "Nearly. The thing he was wearing under the quidditch leathers... it's a uniform for a muggle sport."

Minerva sat back and raised her eyebrows.

"Very well then. That's what I mean by you seeing things I won't. Keep me informed, will you?"

Hermione nodded and rose.

“Excellent, then I’ll see you tomorrow in class.”

Hermione gave her a small smile and left the office, questions about Draco Malfoy circling in her head.

“... and as you heard at the start of term feast, this is Professor Hermione Granger. She will be student teaching with me this year, before taking over the class full time next year. We will be alternating lessons, and Professor Granger will also be holding office hours for any students who require extra help.”

Hermione was standing in front of the class of first year students, and she could hardly believe how tiny they were. They were watching her with wide eyes, and Hermione was nearly certain she could pick out the two or three muggleborns in the class based on the looks of utter amazement on their faces.

“Now, Professor Granger, why don’t you demonstrate an example of advanced Transfiguration?”

Hermione smiled and walked forward, remembering this moment from her own first day of Transfiguration. Hermione tapped her wand on the desk and turned it into a lion. It roared and the class jumped, before she turned it back into a desk.

Minerva gave her an amused smile.

“We will be working up to that over a matter of years. Now then, to begin, we will be turning matchsticks into needles.”

Hermione helped pass out the matchsticks and then walked among the students to help.

“Oh bugger,” she heard one student mutter, and she turned to find a young boy who looked remarkably like a young Harry Potter, except his eyes were hazel instead of bottle green.

“Can I help you, Mr....”

“Fawley,” he said. “David Fawley.”

“Alright then Mr. Fawley, let’s see you try.”

He just sighed and waved his wand, but nothing happened.

“I just don’t understand. My dad is all, ‘we expect great things son!’ but I’ve never been great shakes at magic. Not like Harry, at any rate.”

“Harry?” asked Hermione curiously.

“Yes, Harry Potter. Supposedly we’re related, though you wouldn’t know it.”

Hermione just stared. The young boy did look remarkably like both Harry and James Potter, but of course they were both only children.

“Mr. Fawley, I’m afraid I’m a little confused. Harry Potter is...”

“Your best friend, I know. I know all about you Professor. My mum and dad followed the war closely. They were thrilled when I wrote to tell them you would be teaching us Transfiguration.”

Again Hermione just stared. This wasn’t terribly surprising. She was only three years older than the seventh years after all, and the current first years would have been seven or eight years old when the war ended. But still, it was jarring.

“Why don’t you come by office hours sometime, and we’ll chat about it. And on the off chance you *are* related to Harry, I’ll tell you a secret. He didn’t get this on the first try, either. Transfiguration was never his strongest subject in school, and I tutored him in it extensively the entire time he was at Hogwarts.”

David’s eyes lit up at this, and Hermione had to chuckle just a bit. “Now then, I think the issue is your wand motion. Here, let me show you...”

After correcting little David Fawley, Hermione continued to walk through the students, though she couldn’t help but keep an eye on him for the rest of the class. He reminded her so much of Harry at that age, it was uncanny.

At long last the bell rang, and the students swarmed the door.

“Excellent Hermione,” said Minerva. “That was a great first class. Now brace yourself. We have seventh year Slytherins coming up.”

Hermione just sighed and nodded. She was sure her day was about to get significantly worse.

Draco

Draco headed into the Great Hall for lunch. The first two classes had gone rather well, to his surprise. The students were clearly a bit wary of him, but after a rather jovial introduction from Professor Slughorn, Draco walked through the students and helped correct their potions. They had warmed to him quickly enough, though in fairness it was just first and second years. None of them had overlapped with Draco in school.

He glanced at the staff table and saw Granger sitting off by herself, along with several other free seats. Shrugging to himself he walked toward her. They had sat together for nearly

every meal so far, and though they didn't really speak much, Draco already found some comfort in the familiarity of it. And he had to admit, it was entertaining to watch her out of the corner of his eye. At dinner the previous night she had worked on that muggle puzzle of hers and at breakfast this morning, he watched as she made that odd muggle coffee again and then saw with some curiosity that both *The Daily Prophet* and *The Times* were delivered. She took one look at the front page of *The Daily Prophet*, snorted, and then threw it aside and buried herself in *The Times* instead.

He dropped into the seat next to her and noticed she was stabbing her chicken rather aggressively with her fork.

"Rough morning Granger?" he asked.

She just glared at her chicken. "You should call me Professor Mudblood, Malfoy. That seems to be the preferred moniker in Slytherin House."

Draco stilled and fully turned to her. "Who was it?"

She sighed now. "It doesn't matter. It's not like I wasn't expecting it, and I gave them detention."

"Granger, tell me. Who was it?"

She looked at him and raised her eyebrows. "Travers, Paulson, and Ribberton."

"So all seventh years then," he muttered.

She just inclined her head.

"I'll supervise it for you," he said.

Now she just stared at him. "Why would you do that?"

Draco shifted uncomfortably. "Because I was a little shit as a kid, and I owe you. And they won't fuck with me."

She narrowed her eyes. "I can handle them, Malfoy."

"It's a bad idea Granger, and you know it."

"Malfoy, I have to do it. If they think I'm scared of them then they will be relentless for the rest of the year. I know to be on my guard with them, I'm not stupid."

"Nobody has ever accused you of being stupid," he muttered. "Not even me."

She smiled a bit at this. "It will be fine. It's not like they're going to *Avada* me."

Draco went a bit cold at how casually she said this. Had that really been her life?

Yes, said a small voice. *Because of people like you.*

“Fine, but at least tell me when and where.”

She chewed on this a bit and sighed.

“Fine, I scheduled it for Friday evening. They’ll be clearing the Great Hall from dinner and doing the dishes the muggle way.”

Draco’s eyes got big. “Slytherin quidditch tryouts are that evening. They asked me to book the pitch for them.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” she said a bit smugly. “I trust they’ll think twice about screwing with me after that.”

Draco was torn between annoyance at what this might do to the Slytherin quidditch team and amusement that she was that underhanded. He decided amusement won out.

“Well, those fuckers deserve it, I suppose.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “You’ve moved on from ‘mudblood’ then, have you?”

Draco squirmed a bit. “I shouldn’t have called you that,” he said.

She considered him for a moment. “That word never offended me, you know, not really.”

Now Draco gaped at her. “Excuse me? It’s just... so foul.”

She shrugged. “The whole concept of blood purity is what’s foul. And it’s irrational. There’s no demonstrable difference in magical power on the basis of parentage. None whatsoever. So whether I’m called a muggleborn or a mudblood, the fact that it’s something people feel the need to point out in the first place is the thing that bothers me.”

Draco sat back and gave her a skeptical look. “But you’ve so clearly embraced the whole muggleborn thing.”

She looked amused at this. “Sure, but only in the sense that I was raised by muggles. I’m comfortable in that world, I’m not intimidated by muggle innovation, and I keep up with current events. But that’s all it means to be muggleborn, and these are all things that wizards who were raised by other wizards could do too if they actually bothered to try. I haven’t lived in the muggle world since I was a child, and yet I can still blend in there. It’s *really* not that hard. That being said, I know I’m a token, so I hope to set an example for other muggleborns who come after me. I want to give my students the confidence that they can succeed in this world regardless of their parentage. But really, the muggleborn thing shouldn’t matter. It should just be one of those odd facts about me, similar to how I take my coffee or the fact that I enjoy puzzles. It certainly shouldn’t be the single most defining thing in my life, but it is. And since I know I can’t change the wizarding world’s perspective on this, I’ve been forced to lean into it a little to trailblaze for others. Evidently that’s my burden, in much the same way as Harry’s burden was to kill Voldemort. He never asked to be the Chosen One, and I never asked to be the Queen of the Muggleborns. But here we are, so I do the best I can with it, even though I think it’s ridiculous.”

She stabbed another piece of chicken, as Draco just stared at her.

“What?” she asked.

“I just... I never thought about it that way I guess,” he muttered.

“Of course you didn’t. Very few purebloods do.”

He furrowed his brow. “But still, the term mudblood...”

“Is considered offensive in this world, so I gave them detention for it. But in my personal view, it’s just a word for an offensive concept, and not a very creative one either. I mean, the whole notion of it being *blood* that matters is not even scientifically sound. We’re really talking about eggs and sperm that’s either muddy or pure. Blood has nothing to do with it.”

She took another bite of her chicken as Draco just stared again. Then the absurdity of what she just said made him start to laugh. She glanced at him with amusement, and out of the corner of his eye Draco could see the other professors and some students staring at them in surprise.

“So I should have been calling you what... mudeggs? Muddyeggs?”

She grinned. “It doesn’t have quite the same ring to it, does it? I’ll grant you that much. Mudblood certainly rolls off the tongue much better.”

“In fairness, puresperm isn’t as bad,” said Draco with mock seriousness.

“I prefer pureseed,” she quipped.

“Puresemen,” he countered.

“Hmmm, I *thought* you were going to say purecum, but I’m very glad you didn’t. It’s a bit too close to precum and that could get confusing.”

At this, Draco blinked again and felt his cock twitch involuntarily. He took a deep breath and then grinned.

“Granger, if you had told me a week ago that I’d be discussing precum with you, I’m pretty sure I would have sent you to St. Mungo’s to get your head checked.”

She grinned at this. “Same, actually. Especially since all of you pureseeds are so damn embarrassed by public discussions about sex. I mean, did you see Neville’s face yesterday? Poor Nev looked like he has never read the word ‘sex’ on the cover of a magazine before.”

“He probably hasn’t,” said Draco in amusement.

“Maybe I should let him borrow it. Perhaps it would help him see that there’s more to life than pureseed mortification and plants.”

“Planning on turning Longbottom into some sort of sex god with that magazine are you?”

“Sure, especially if he has a boyfriend. The best article in it this month was titled ‘Seven Scorching Sex Tricks to Blow His Mind.’”

Again, Draco felt his cock twitching as he laughed.

“Longbottom will probably self-destruct if you let him read it.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because he will clearly be imagining you doing those things to him.”

Now she looked at him like he had gone mad.

“What are you on about?”

Now it was Draco’s turn to look at her like *she* was mad. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed? Longbottom is into you. I’d wager he’s even been carrying a torch for you, maybe since eighth year. I noticed he was into you back then too. Even when we weren’t speaking, it was obvious. I’d bet a good chunk of my vault that that’s why he’s finishing his apprenticeship in person instead of floo’ing in each day. He heard you would be here.”

She gave him an utterly horrified look and then groaned and dropped her head to the table. Draco couldn’t help but chuckle.

“He wouldn’t be that bad, Granger.”

She lifted her head and gave him another look of disgust.

“There’s nothing wrong with Nev, but he’s just so... so... sweet!”

Draco blinked. “What’s wrong with that?”

She gave him a skeptical look. “Do you really see me with somebody sweet? Some lovely bloke who is so nice they let me walk all over them without putting up a fight first? Because that’s Neville. He’s a wonderful friend. And he will never challenge me or push back when I cross a line.”

Draco furrowed his brow. He could see her point but then again... “When have you ever crossed lines?”

She gave him a stony look. “I have. I try to have a good reason for it, but I can be ruthless. Even more so than Harry and Ron at times. Ron, at least, was willing to fight with me about it if I went too far, and he thought there wasn’t a good reason for it.”

“And Longbottom wouldn’t.”

She shook her head. “The one and only time he has ever stood up to me was in first year right before Harry, Ron, and I went after the Sorcerer’s Stone. He didn’t understand why we were sneaking out at night and would risk losing House points. I just body-binded him and snuck out anyway.”

Draco was torn by a bizarre mix of sympathy and laughter.

“Suffice to say I’m not into Neville. I never have been. And if he’s really here for... Godric help me.”

“Just ward your door at night and let him down easy once he asks you out,” said Draco.

She glanced sideways at him and then looked forward and suddenly wouldn’t make eye contact. “If I did that it would keep you out too.”

“So? Why would you... oh.”

Her nightmares.

“I usually cast a silencing charm,” she said quickly. “But I’m out of habit, and anyway... at some point Harry and I stopped doing it. We sleep down the hall from each other so we don’t hear minor nightmares. But we could still hear each other for the ones that are as bad as... that. We could always wake the other one up. I only have two that make me scream like that. Harry has three or four.”

Draco felt sick, and all of the coaching from his mind healer about that day she was tortured in his home immediately left his brain except for one thing.

If you can’t find the words to tell her you’re sorry, find a way to show her you’re sorry.

“Don’t put up silencing charms then,” he said. “The other night... it was faint. The walls are really thick and nobody but me could have heard it. We can put up a ward on your door that keeps out everybody but you and me.”

She looked at him, and Draco saw an odd mix of hope and caution on her face.

“I... but why?”

“I’ve already told you. I owe you. Especially for... that day. And I get it. I have some pretty bad nightmares too if I go too long without help.”

She nodded slowly at this. “Alright. I admit, the nightmares were the biggest reason I chose to live with Harry the last couple of years. We both needed somebody at night.”

Draco glanced at her. “I never got the impression that you two were...”

She shook her head quickly. “We weren’t. We aren’t. But it was... well it was a lot for Ron, especially with both of us. Harry’s are the worst of course, but mine come in waves, and they’re pretty bad when I’m having them. Ron has nightmares too, but his experience in the war wasn’t quite as traumatic as mine and Harry’s. He left us for a time and well.... He’s never been under the cruciatus before, if you can believe it. Eventually Ron moved out, but Harry and I stayed to help each other at night.”

“Who is staying with Potter then, now that you aren’t there?”

She shrugged. “Ginny moved in. They got engaged recently, and her mother finally let her do it without putting up a fight. Harry’s never told me this but I suspect it’s one of the reasons he went ahead and proposed. He’s wanted to marry her for awhile, but me moving out lit the fire to actually ask. He didn’t want to be alone.”

Draco was startled. “I hadn’t heard that.”

She smiled a little. “They’ve kept it very quiet to keep it out of the papers. They want to spring it on the media once the wedding’s over.”

Draco found himself smiling at this a little. “Rita Skeeter will have a cow.”

To his surprise she gave a very satisfied smirk. “That’s the plan.”

Then the smile fell from her face. “If you’re really willing to...”

“I am,” he said shortly.

“Alright, but turnabout is fair play. That was my deal with Harry. He helps me, and I help him. No judgment. There aren’t many our age who have those horrors, but somehow I think you’re probably on that short list with us.”

“Granger, I don’t need...”

“Then I’ll ward you out too,” she said firmly. “I won’t have that sort of thing be one-sided, especially with you.”

Because we aren’t friends. We just both have shitty pasts.

He sighed. “Fine.”

She nodded and rose, so Draco did too. As usual she cast an amused look his way as she observed his manners. “I have to go meet Minerva before the next class. But... thanks, Malfoy.”

He just nodded and watched her walk off, once again without robes but wearing a professional, muggle dress that hugged her arse nearly as well as those jeans.

Fuck me, what did I just agree to do?

Hermione

Hermione heard a knock on her door, and she opened it cautiously to find Malfoy looking behind him to see if anybody was watching.

She stepped aside to let him in, still a bit unsure about the agreement they had come to earlier that day. She never would have considered inviting him to help her with nightmares, until he suggested warding everybody out. She found herself almost panicking to think that he would never be able to wake her up again like he had that first night.

She had to admit, leaving Harry and his support at night had been one of the hardest things about coming to Hogwarts. She had assumed she would just be trapped in those nightmares until they burned themselves out, and she just hoped they would diminish as the years moved on. They had lessened some since the war ended, and she hoped they would continue to trend that way, but until that happened she thought she would just have to deal with it.

The notion that Malfoy was willing to wake her up was nothing short of shocking, but she had latched onto his offer instinctively. She somehow knew that he had seen similar horrors. Even Neville, whom she knew had had a very hard war, had been more protected at Hogwarts than either she or Malfoy had been. Yes, she actually had more in common with Draco Malfoy than with Neville when it came to this one thing. And he had been decent about it that first night. She couldn't help but agree to let him do it, especially once he said that it could be a mutual arrangement. She wouldn't owe him anything that way.

"We'll do blood wards," he said shortly. "They are tied to family Houses. You're the only wizarding member of your House so your blood won't give access to anybody else. Technically my parents can get through any Malfoy blood wards, but Father is obviously in Azkaban until further notice, and Mother would probably faint with mortification before she ever made it onto the Hogwarts grounds in the first place. So nobody but me will be getting in from my House."

Hermione eyed him, feeling a mixture of caution and curiosity at this. Blood wards were notoriously dark. Then again, this was Malfoy, and if anybody knew how to do blood wards it would be him.

"So Neville won't be able to get in?" She confirmed.

"No," he said shortly. "Nor any other professors or students, either. They would have to add their own blood at the same time as us. I'm related to a lot of purebloods distantly, but we'll do a blood ward that only acknowledges direct lines. Just parents, children, and siblings."

"So you have no kids then, is that what I'm hearing?" she teased.

He gave her a wolfish grin at this. "Like every good pureblood heir, I am well-versed in the contraceptive charm and do not trust witches who tell me they're on the potion. I have sired no heirs of my own, nor any bastards. My bloodline currently ends with me."

She just rolled her eyes at this. "I guess blood matters more than I thought then, if we're warding with it," she muttered.

He just smirked at her, as he pulled a knife out of his satchel and handed it to her. She recognized it as a silver knife for potions work, though it was an unusually handsome one.

Typical Malfoy.

She eyed it for a moment and then walked to her bathroom to retrieve some rubbing alcohol, which she poured on the blade.

He frowned. "What are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning it," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "Honestly Granger. It's clean."

She just pursed her lips. "Wizards know very little about microbiology and germs. This will clean it at a microbial level."

He rolled his eyes at her again, but watched as she sliced her palm open and then cleaned the blade again before handing it back to him. He sliced his own palm and then gestured for her to move forward as he took out his wand and began to mutter a spell toward her front door. He smeared his bloody palm against it, and she did the same, following the same pattern he made.

As she watched the blood seemed to shimmer and then absorb into her door. Malfoy examined it for a moment before removing his wand to heal his palm. Then to her surprise he turned to her and grabbed her hand too.

Hermione felt her heart pounding as he took her hand and turned her palm up to face him. His hands were so much larger than hers, and they were surprisingly calloused for somebody who was practically part of the nobility. Then again, he was a quidditch player. His hands certainly reflected it. She had to force herself to stop thinking about how they would feel on some other part of her body.

He muttered the spell to heal her too, and then another one to clean the blood off. For some reason he swiped his thumb along the faint line that was left behind, before nodding to himself and releasing her.

She took a deep breath and willed herself to look up at him. "Thanks Malfoy."

He smirked again. "Always happy to assist in some good old fashioned cock blocking. I'll see you around Granger."

He slipped out of her room, casting one last, rather speculative look back at her as he left. A moment later she heard his own door open before she shut hers and leaned against it, eyes closed.

Bloody Malfoy.

Harry and especially Ron would be horrified if they knew what she had just done. Harry had testified in Malfoy's favor after the war, which was largely why he avoided Azkaban. But she also knew that neither of them trusted Malfoy as far as they could throw him. Up until her arrival at Hogwarts, she had felt exactly the same way.

She wasn't sure why she suddenly trusted him enough to blood ward her door so only the two of them could get into her room. But Hermione had always felt she was a rather good judge

of character, and something told her that Malfoy was different now. She still wasn't sure she liked him, but she instinctively felt he wouldn't seek to harm her.

Neville wouldn't harm me either.

She believed that too, she really did. Neville wasn't capable of trying to harm her or anybody else he cared about. But Malfoy's observations about Neville had inexplicably made Hermione a bit uncomfortable to be sleeping two doors down from him. She felt more secure knowing that he couldn't just wander into her room in an effort to catch her privately.

And she also hadn't missed Malfoy's comment that other professors and *students* wouldn't be able to get into her room either. Hermione hadn't even thought of that angle with the wards, but Malfoy clearly had as he picked a ward that would block out any purebloods who might be distant relatives of his.

In other words, it will keep Slytherin House out.

Hermione knew the Slytherins despised her, at least the older ones who had overlapped with her at Hogwarts. She hoped the prejudice would lessen over time but it would take years. It had never occurred to her that they might try to get into her room, but Malfoy had evidently thought about it. It made her blood run cold to think about students targeting her in that way, and she couldn't help but be grateful to have a sanctuary now, assuming Malfoy's wards worked as advertised.

Yes, Draco Malfoy was an enigma, but Hermione couldn't help but trust him, at least with this one thing. Harry and Ron didn't need to know about it, and nobody else would find out either as long as they respected her privacy and stayed out of her room.

She sighed and started to get ready for bed, wondering if her most recent nightmare was a one-off or if it was the start of another wave. She grabbed a sleep bra out of her dresser and put it on before throwing another tank top over her head.

Just in case.

Chapter 4: Hermione

Draco

Draco had had an interesting first week, to put it mildly. Between his odd new arrangement with Granger and everyone's reactions to it, he had plenty to think about as he walked down to the pitch to get it ready for Slytherin team tryouts.

True to their new arrangement, Granger had not put up a silencing charm at night. He had woken up twice more this past week to her screams and shook her awake each time. Their exchanges afterwards were always brief, lasting only long enough for her to tell him her dreams came in waves and usually only lasted a week or two before she got a break from them. Draco didn't mind, though. Other than the unfortunate fact that she had started to wear a bra at night, he rather liked seeing her in her post-dream state. She looked softer somehow and more like the girl who had been tortured on his sitting room floor. Being able to help her when she looked like that made him feel like he was finally making it up to her, at least a little bit.

And then there were their interactions during the day. Draco knew the staff and most of the student body was very confused by the rapport that he and Granger had unexpectedly built over the first week. They didn't share all their meals together, but they shared most now, and he had noticed that she had even started to choose him over Longbottom ever since he pointed out Longbottom's very obvious feelings for her. Minerva in particular looked completely gobsmacked by how well they seemed to be getting along, and Draco had to admit he was surprised too. But he knew he had grown up, and evidently she had too. At some point they would probably need to sit down and talk about all the shit that had happened between them their first six or seven years of knowing each other, but for the time being they both seemed happy to put the past in the past and keep it there through some unspoken agreement.

For Draco's part, having somebody to sit with at meals was an unexpected boon. He had never really thought it would happen, let alone so quickly. He knew Hogwarts wouldn't be as lonely as the Manor, but he still didn't think he would be spending most of his free time with the other staff members or eat with them regularly. And yet, here he was, sitting with and being entertained by this little muggleborn witch, meal after meal. He had totally abandoned his plan to take meals in his room since they fell into this habit with each other.

She was amusing, he realized. He had always known she was very bright of course, but she had a biting sense of humor and a sharp tongue. And when they didn't chat with each other – usually because they were reading their papers – she entertained him anyway. Even when reading to herself she did it expressively. She made little noises that told Draco whether she thought the article she was reading was interesting or not, important or not, well-written or not. Draco had taken to opening his own paper under the pretense of reading, only to sit still and listen to Granger instead. Then he got caught up in the common room at night.

Her behavior in the common room was also interesting to observe. Plenty of the staff members used the tables to grade papers or spread out with their own work or research. They also used the chairs by the fire for reading. Granger certainly did these things too, but after she finally finished the odd muggle puzzle she had been working on from her Sunday paper, she took over an entire table for herself and pulled out something she called a jigsaw puzzle. She dumped it out with a flourish and had been spending a couple hours each night working on it alone, after her grading was done.

“Well it’s not like we have TV here, do we?” she asked, when he questioned what the hell she was doing.

Draco didn’t understand what she was talking about, but he made some agreeable noises to this comment and then left her to it while he *actually* read the paper he had only pretended to read that morning. When he was done, she was still working on the border.

It had been three nights now, and surprisingly the other staff and the elves left it alone, apparently content to let Granger puzzle by herself in the corner. Draco thought she was making rather slow progress, but he could see it finally coming together. Of course, she wouldn’t be working on it tonight with her detention to supervise, nor would he be able to watch her out of the corner of his eye with quidditch tryouts.

As he passed the Great Hall on his way out toward the pitch, he stuck his head in and smirked to see the three seventh year Slytherins grumbling while they cleared the tables, with Granger standing there aiming her wand at them. She noticed him and just raised an eyebrow at him. He wandered in and waited until the three Slytherins noticed he was there. Draco was decked out in his quidditch garb, and there would be no mistake where he was heading.

“Hopefully this teaches you three a lesson,” he said. “I’m sure Slytherin will miss you on the team this year.”

“Professor Malfoy, can’t you please...” started Ribberton.

“No,” Draco cut him off. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t, nor would Professor Slughorn. Now then, I must be off, but Professor Granger, send me your patronus if these three give you any trouble, won’t you?”

She just gave him a wry look, but said, “Of course, Professor Malfoy. I’m sure they will work as quickly as possible to catch the end of quidditch tryouts.”

Draco smirked at this as he exited, casting one look back and seeing Granger still standing there with her wand on them.

Good, he thought with some relief. He knew Gryffindors could be bloody reckless, but he understood her point about supervising this detention. It would set a very bad precedent in Slytherin House if she didn’t. Still, he was glad to see she clearly didn’t trust those three. Draco didn’t trust them either, and he resolved to push the tryouts along as quickly as possible so he could check on them on his way back to the staff quarters.

As he arrived on the pitch, Draco saw that most of Slytherin House had turned up for the tryouts, especially the girls.

“Professor!” said a feminine voice that set Draco’s teeth on edge.

“Yes Miss Greengrass?” he said, turning around to stare at Astoria Greengrass, a seventh year Slytherin. Her older sister Daphne was Draco’s age, and unfortunately Draco had known her since she was a child. Draco, however, had pointedly avoided the Greengrass sisters ever since he was Marked, first to keep them out of it and later to keep his mother’s schemes at bay.

“Professor, I just wanted to let you know I’d be happy to help you... clean up afterwards. You know, maybe gather your balls?”

Fucking hell, he thought. *Surely* she didn’t intend that to be a double entendre. That would be wildly inappropriate. But as he looked at her, and she gave him a suggestive smirk back, he realized that was *exactly* what she meant.

“That won’t be necessary, Miss Greengrass,” he said curtly before turning his back on her and walking toward the pitch quickly.

“Let me know if you change your mind, Professor! I’m always available for... anything you might need! Anything at all...”

Draco just gritted his teeth as he picked up his pace and practically sprinted to the pitch.

“Alright Davies,” Draco said to the captain. “Do this as quickly as possible, please. I have other matters I need to attend to this evening as well. I’ll just be observing.”

Davies nodded and immediately launched into the tryouts, which Draco was pleased to see moved along. As he flew above them, he caught a wink of binoculars on the ground below and realized Astoria was watching him.

Sod it all.

Draco knew he would have some difficulty with the older students. After the war was over, Minerva and the Ministry required every student who opted to return to Hogwarts to repeat their previous year due to the disruption from the war in the year before. They also allowed a new wave of first year students in the following September, which meant that the current fourth year class was twice as large as usual. But half of the fourth years, and all of the current fifth through seventh years were a year older than was typical. That meant Draco himself was only three years older than the current seventh years, even though he was twenty-one.

Minerva and Horace had both warned him that being so close in age to the older students could make teaching these students a bit more difficult, and that was one reason, among others, that they had required a year of student teaching before Draco took over the class full-time. Once Draco was teaching all on his own, there would be a four-year age gap between him and the oldest students, and that gap would further widen with each passing year.

As it happened, Draco had found Minerva and Horace were correct that the older students were more problematic than the younger ones. Many of them remembered Draco. A few of them had been bullied by Draco. And quite a few of them, especially in the Houses that weren't Slytherin, thought Draco was still a Death Eater.

The most difficult group, unsurprisingly, had been the seventh year Gryffindors, especially the boys. Draco knew that Gryffindors were always a bit reckless compared to the other three Houses, and sure enough, several of the boys had tried to get a rise out of Draco by taunting him about being a Death Eater who had just gotten off. The very first time this happened, Draco had simply taken his robes off and rolled his shirt sleeves up before asking them if there was any *academic* help they required. They had taken one look at the Dark Mark on his left forearm, gulped, and then gotten back to work.

Not so brave now, are you?

The silver lining was the fact that the NEWT Potions class was rather small. So when all was said and done, Draco didn't have to interact with many of the older Gryffindor boys because most of them had opted not to take a NEWT in Potions. Draco and Horace together had gotten the few that were in the class in line over the past week, and they had handled the disgruntled Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs in a similar way.

But as Draco flew around the pitch and saw the wink of Astoria's binoculars, he suddenly had the thought that the most difficult group of all might be the Slytherin seventh year girls, with the sixth years a close second. He wouldn't put it past *any* of them to reach out to his mother and try to arrange something behind his back.

As the tryouts finally came to an end, Draco pulled Davies aside and told him to clean up before mounting his broom and flying to the front doors to beat the crowd of girls who started to spill out onto the pitch to meet him once tryouts were over. He smirked at their looks of disappointment, knowing he now had a ten minute head start on them.

He dismounted and slung his broom over his shoulder, as he strode through the hall and peered into the Great Hall again to check on Granger. To Draco's consternation he saw the Great Hall was empty, and it appeared that the dishes were cleared away. He thought about this for a moment before remembering that she had also mentioned making them clean the dishes the muggle way. Draco walked toward a side hall where he knew the Hufflepuff common room was located, as well as the entry to the kitchens.

He approached a painting with a bowl of fruit that he had discovered in sixth year, tickled the pear, and a green handle appeared. He pulled the picture open to find the house elves tittering as Granger supervised Ribberton and Paulson with their cleaning. Travers, he saw, was bound to a chair.

"Erm..." he said, as he announced himself.

"Ah, hello Professor Malfoy. I take it quidditch trials are over?" she asked brightly.

"Yes," he said, eyeing Travers, who was giving him a pleading look.

“And will Slytherin House have a strong team this year?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Strong enough I’d wager. But Professor Granger, would you care to explain...?”

He gestured at Travers.

“Oh yes, I’m afraid he tried to attack me. But evidently he forgot that I’m rather skilled in practical defense, having been trained by Harry Potter and several aurors, both before and after we took down Voldemort.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that he just stared at her, as Travers’ face darkened.

Then the first thing she said suddenly registered.

“You did *WHAT?!* ” he shouted, as he rounded on Travers, who was now cowering under the force of Draco’s stare.

“Sir, she’s just a mud...” started Travers, and Draco found himself aiming his own wand at Travers.

“I *strongly* suggest you not finish that word Travers, unless you want me to make sure you’re expelled. Assuming, of course, that Professor McGonagall doesn’t decide to do just that when she finds out you attacked a teacher. Now tell me, what did you do?”

Travers just sank down and refused to speak.

Draco looked at Granger and gave her a questioning look.

She just rolled her eyes. “He threw a knife at me.”

Draco went cold, as he remembered Bellatrix doing the same thing to his old house elf Dobby.

“And you...” he started.

“Transfigured it, of course. While it was flying through the air.” She gestured towards a large flower that was sitting on the floor nearby. “Defensive transfiguration was the thesis for my mastery, you know. I studied some other things as well, but that was really my focus.”

“Defensive transfiguration,” he said slowly. “I don’t follow.”

She shrugged. “Transfiguration is underutilized in dueling and practical defense. I developed techniques for it and trained to use it in a fight. Some of the aurors are using my methods now. Unfortunately for Mr. Travers, I’ve practiced with knives quite a bit.”

As had happened so often during the past week, Draco felt an odd combination of horror and humor as he listened to her. But then he surveyed his three students and saw the two who

were working had their heads down, clearly cowed by the little witch, and she had Travers well in hand.

“Alright then. I suppose you’ll be telling Professor Slughorn about Travers once these two are done?”

“Yes of course, Professor Malfoy,” she said cordially.

He nodded and turned to ask one of the house elves for another helping of dessert before he started to leave the kitchens.

“But Professor!” said Travers. Malfoy turned back toward him, a cold look on his face.

Travers gulped. “You can’t possibly... I mean, you *hate* her! Everybody knows that!”

Draco narrowed his eyes and slowly walked back to Travers before crouching down in front of him. Travers sank back at the look on Draco’s face.

“What I *hate* Travers, is when assumptions are made about me based on my surname, most of which are wildly wrong. Another thing I *hate* is when a member of my own House is foolish enough to perpetuate the lies from the Dark Lord. You do realize that he himself was a half-blood don’t you?”

Travers looked stunned.

“Chew on that for a bit. The Dark Lord triggered a blood purity war when he himself was a half-blood. His father was a muggle. And he was taken down by another half-blood, thanks in large part to the help from the muggleborn witch whom you are fortunate enough to have as your teacher this year. If that doesn’t prove to you that the Dark Lord was full of shit, then you’re even more idiotic than I thought you were.”

Draco rose and saw that Paulson and Ribberton had stopped cleaning and were staring at him in amazement. Even Granger looked surprised, but not displeased.

“I’ll see you around Granger,” he said, smirking at her.

“Later Malfoy,” she replied as she aimed her wand back at Paulson and Ribberton before giving them a fierce look. They immediately put their heads down and began cleaning.

Draco just chuckled as he made his way back to the staff common room, satisfied that she had it handled. As he passed the table with her jigsaw puzzle, he paused and looked at it closely for the first time.

1000 Pieces

According to the label on the front of the box, which she had propped up, the finished puzzle would look like Buckingham Palace. He could see that she was using the picture on the box to help guide her.

Draco glanced around and saw that none of the other staff members were paying attention to him. He quickly found a piece that appeared to have the center of the Union Jack on it, and he swiped it. He slipped it into his pocket and chuckled again as he made his way down the corridor to his room.

You see Granger, by 1000 pieces they really meant 999.

Hermione

“Damn,” she muttered to herself as she stared at her near-complete puzzle. She had five pieces left, but six spaces. She had looked everywhere but couldn’t find that final piece.

She sighed to herself. A couple years ago she had gotten into the habit of picking up puzzles at charity shops and then re-donating them once she had finished them. This sort of thing had happened before. It was always a risk when the box was unsealed, but it was still frustrating.

She put the five remaining pieces in place and snorted. Ironically, the one that was missing was part of the flag. She just stared at it and wrinkled her nose.

“Finished, then?” asked the voice of Draco Malfoy.

She sighed and gestured toward it. “Nearly. I’m missing a piece.”

“Any idea where it ended up?” he asked curiously.

She shrugged. “I bought it at a charity shop so I’m sure the previous owner lost it. Still, it’s bloody obnoxious isn’t it? To be so close...”

He gave her a small smile. “Better luck next time then.”

She gave him a begrudging smile as he moved along, toward the hall leading to the bedrooms.

She turned back to her puzzle and sighed before breaking it up again and putting it back in the box. Tomorrow was a Sunday so she would get a new crossword. She would bring out the next jigsaw puzzle once it was complete.

Hermione headed to her room and placed the puzzle on the table for donation. Then she got undressed and slipped into bed, pulling out the Marauder’s Map as she did so. Staff patrols had officially started in the past week, and Hermione was scheduled for the next day. She had taken to getting the map out to watch it for a bit each evening, making note of the patrol routes of the Prefects and the favorite haunts of rule-breaking students.

She smirked to herself as she thought about her turn. Hermione guessed she would set a record for the number of students caught out of bed.

Not that she would be too harsh and give them detention or anything like that. She herself had been a rather notorious rule breaker, though it had usually been justified. Still, she had rules to uphold now, and Harry was right. The map would be her secret weapon. And once it was known that Professor Granger had eyes in the back of her head, students would stop sneaking out at night when she was scheduled to patrol.

As had happened so often over the past week, Hermione's eyes roved over the staff quarters. To her surprise, this part of the castle had not appeared on the map until Hermione had walked through the staff areas and the three bedrooms she had visited the previous week. The bedrooms she hadn't entered were still missing, but she could now see her room, Malfoy's room, and the third bedroom, which had been taken by Neville. Evidently the map required its current owner to physically visit parts of the castle before they would be magically added to the map. She was a bit amused to realize that neither the Marauders nor the twins had ever made it here before.

Her eyes lingered on Malfoy, who appeared to be moving around his room. There was no question he was the biggest surprise of Hogwarts so far. She doubted they would ever be terribly close, but she couldn't help but think about all the changes in his behavior she had noticed and hoped they were genuine.

As she watched Malfoy, she furrowed her brow as she saw him leave his room and head back to the staff common room before exiting into the corridor.

Hermione frowned and sat up to watch. Malfoy wasn't scheduled for patrol tonight, and it was past curfew. Of course professors didn't really have a curfew, but it was still curious.

As she watched she saw him climb several flights of stairs and move down another couple of hallways before he stopped in the middle of the fourth floor corridor before walking back and forth three times. Then suddenly he seemed to walk into the wall and disappear.

Hermione sucked in a breath. She knew *exactly* where Malfoy had gone, having watched him do this before during sixth year.

The Room of Requirement.

It had to be the Room of Requirement. Hermione knew it was unplotable and had never appeared on the map no matter how many times she, Harry, and Ron had visited over the years. And it should be *right there*, exactly where Malfoy had been moments ago. To Hermione's knowledge, entering an unplotable room was the only way somebody disappeared from the map entirely, unless they actually left the Hogwarts grounds.

Hermione felt a mixture of anger and profound disappointment. She could think of no reason for him to go back there, not unless he was investigating the damage caused by the fiendfyre. She hesitated for a moment, but then made up her mind. Minerva had asked her to watch for suspicious behavior, and she was sure this qualified.

She quickly dressed, before snatching the map and making her way toward the Room of Requirement, being careful to avoid the Prefects and Pamona, who was on patrol tonight.

As she reached the Room she slowed and stared at the blank wall. She had checked the map periodically, and Malfoy hadn't emerged. She took a deep breath and walked back and forth in front of the door.

I need the place where things are hidden. I need the place where things are hidden. I need the place where things are hidden.

Hermione opened her eyes and looked expectantly at the wall, but to her surprise it was still blank.

She furrowed her brow, very confused now. Evidently he hadn't gone into the version of the room that had housed the old Vanishing Cabinet. But then what *was* he doing in there?

As Hermione struggled to think of something, she heard a noise and instinctively transformed into her cat form and slunk behind a statue.

A couple of Prefects strolled by, and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief before she remembered she was a professor and they couldn't give her detention.

Mentally rolling her eyes at her own stupidity, she stepped out and prepared to turn back into herself before she paused at the curious sound.

In her cat form Hermione enjoyed heightened senses. Her emotions were somewhat dulled as a cat, but her hearing, vision, and sense of smell were all much more acute than when she was a human. And as she strained her ears, she was sure she heard piano music. And it was coming through that blank wall.

Struck with a sudden idea Hermione turned back into a human and started to pace again.

I need a place with a piano. I need a place with a piano. I need a place with a piano.

Suddenly, the door shimmered in front of her. Hermione paused and took a deep breath as she reached out to open it just a crack, and the sound of piano music spilled out into the corridor.

Hermione peeked in and to her surprise saw that Malfoy was seated and playing, with his back to her. She glanced around and pulled the door open enough for her to slip inside before transforming back into her cat form and melting into the shadows in one corner.

From her vantage point she listened in awe as he played something that was achingly beautiful.

He's incredible, she realized, wondering how on earth she had never known this about him. She herself had taken lessons for a few years as a child, but it hadn't stuck. However, she had learned enough about it to know that Malfoy was very advanced and must have taken lessons for most of his life to be this good.

She narrowed her cat eyes and read the title of the piece from a distance, which she didn't immediately recognize.

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor

Hermione still wasn't sure what it was so she read a bit further down.

Sergei Rachmaninov

Her eyes widened, as she realized he must be playing one of the Rachmaninov concertos, which were known to be very technically difficult.

Then he flipped a page, and Hermione could see it was covered in black, as his fingers began to fly. Hermione's mouth was literally hanging open as she listened, even though she was still a cat.

Then suddenly he stopped and repeated the few bars he had just played. Then he did it again. And again. Six times he did it before he was satisfied and moved on.

Hermione lost track of time as she listened to him practice, utterly transfixed by what she was hearing. She saw he had dispensed with his robes and had his shirt sleeves rolled up. As he played there were flashes of his old Dark Mark, but she found it didn't bother her. Perhaps it was because she had fought the Death Eaters or maybe she had finally moved past it, but it struck her as nothing more than just a tattoo now.

Then he stopped and reached for something. She saw him pull out a flask from his bag and take a long pull before flipping the sheet music back to the beginning, rolling his shoulders back, and exhaling as he placed his fingers on the keys.

As he exhaled her sensitive cat nose picked up the distinct scent of firewhiskey mixed with that same scent she now knew was just him. She was briefly amused that he was drinking while playing, until she lost her train of thought because he started all over again.

This time he played on and on, without pausing or breaking to repeat any sections. At long last he got to the end, and as he played the final note he punched the air and whooped.

"Fucking *yes!*"

Hermione had the oddest urge to giggle at his obvious delight for having gotten through it without any major errors, but she was a cat so she couldn't make that sound. Still, she continued to watch him in amusement as he stood and seemed to stroke the piano a bit fondly as he studied it.

"You surprised me, pretty girl," he finally said out loud. "When I asked for a piano I was not expecting you."

Hermione went completely still and knew she was holding her breath as she watched him almost caress the keys with his fingers.

“Beautiful, well-balanced, wonderful tuning, pleasing timbre.... And you respond to my touch perfectly. It’s like you were made for me...”

Hermione was nearly spellbound now.

“What should I name you then, hmmm?”

Hermione listened as the silence stretched while he seemed to consider his own question.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said quietly. “There’s really only one option isn’t there? I have to name you Hermione.”

Hermione felt all the air leave her tiny cat lungs at this. She had never heard him say her first name before. It sounded oddly sensual coming from him.

He reached down to grab his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

“I’ll see you around... Hermione,” he said toward the piano, with his trademark Malfoy smirk as he walked toward the door and opened it to let himself out.

Hermione counted to ten to make sure he was really gone before she turned back into herself and walked toward the piano slowly. She felt like she was in a trance, as she remembered his final words.

Pretty girl.

Not expecting you.

Beautiful.

Respond to my touch perfectly.

Like you were made for me.

Surely, *surely* he didn’t mean it that way. He must have named it after her because for some odd reason he had personified the piano as female, and she was the only female he really interacted with at Hogwarts in any personal way. And even *that* was a bit of a stretch. Many of their interactions with each other during their first week were nothing more than a few brief words, or even just a knowing look. Still, the fact remained that she was the only witch on staff remotely close to his age, and they did seem to be settling into something with each other. Exactly what that something was, though, was hard for her to define.

She reached out a tentative hand and touched a few keys. He was right that the sound was superb and the tuning nearly perfect. The touch felt firm to her – she had to exert more pressure and force on the keys to get them to respond than she would have preferred. But evidently for *him* it was exactly what he wanted.

Hermione nearly shuddered as she thought about it. She already knew his hands were calloused from quidditch, but now she also knew that his fingers were strong – much stronger than hers. They would have to be to play this instrument the way he did.

Good God, she thought, as she closed her eyes for a moment and tried to shake herself out of it. She made herself take a step back and refocus. It was late, and it was time to head back. She opened the map and took one last look. Malfoy was back in his room now and very still near the place where she knew his bed was located. She glanced around the rest of the map and saw the coast was clear.

She headed to the door and with one last look at the piano, she whispered, "Mischief managed."

Chapter 5: Towers of Terror

Chapter Notes

I want to make a note about timelines. The Battle of Hogwarts took place in the spring of 1998, and this story takes place just over three years later. Please keep that in mind if you opt to read this chapter, as it may be difficult and triggering for some readers who remember the early 2000's.

TW: Mention of tragic, real life events, suicide, and the loss of loved ones.

Draco

If anybody had asked Draco the best part about seeing a mind healer, he would probably have told them, “the ability to acknowledge and accept uncomfortable truths.”

After three years of mind healing once or twice a week, Draco had acknowledged and accepted many uncomfortable truths: his father was an arse; his mother was too focused on the title; his parents' choices had ruined his family's name; he had been a coward when Potter and his friends showed up at Malfoy Manor that day; Granger had been tortured and seriously injured for no reason at all; blood purity didn't matter; he was better at potions than finance or business; his family was responsible for Granger's nightmares; Astoria Greengrass would probably get him fired if he wasn't careful; Granger had grown up and was really fucking hot now.

Sure, it had taken him a week to fully accept that last point, but he had to give himself some credit for his progress. Three years ago he always fought with himself before finally dropping his hands into his pants and finding some release the handful of times he was struck by her. Back then he was always disgusted with himself whenever he did it. He had always been in denial. But after three years of mind healing and the experiences that came with age, Draco could now recognize those tell-tale signs of physical interest within himself, and he accepted them as true.

So as it was, the night she had told him about her defensive transfiguration training that somehow involved knives, he went back to his room and settled in for a truly fantastic wank without any guilt or hesitation whatsoever. She had looked so confident, so relaxed as she put those three Slytherin boys into their place, that Draco couldn't help it. He had been really turned on, and he easily pictured that first night at Hogwarts when he had gotten a glimpse of her nipples under the muggle tank top and the subsequent days when he admired her arse from afar. It didn't take long before he was coming all over his hands, and that led him to the next uncomfortable truth: he was sexually attracted to Hermione Granger.

Speaking of hard truths, he acknowledged and accepted that his attraction was one-sided. He acknowledged and accepted that he would never be able to touch her the way he wanted to because he had fucked it up years before. He acknowledged and accepted that he deserved nothing but her contempt, and he should feel grateful that she tolerated him in any way. He acknowledged and accepted that once she got over the shock of Longbottom, she would probably give him a chance and end up with him, while Draco finished out his two years or a bit more at Hogwarts, wanking to thoughts of her in the room next door.

These were the reasons he had finally sought out the promised piano. He always played as a way to process stress and frustration, and just because he acknowledged and accepted these things about Granger didn't mean he liked them. So after a week of waiting, he finally made his way to the Room of Requirement to see what, exactly, the house elves had discovered there.

The piano he found had surprised him. In fact, he had been so blown away by it that by the end of his first encounter with her, he acknowledged and accepted he had to name her Hermione. He might never be able to touch Granger, but he would be able to touch Hermione. It would be his hands and her sounds as he played her with an expertise wrought by years of practice and hard work. She would do everything he asked of her, and she would make music for him. And while he coaxed those perfect notes out of her, maybe he could even close his eyes and pretend he was playing Granger's body instead of her namesake.

He had visited Hermione again a couple nights later, and she had sounded just as wonderful, just as perfect as she had the first night. Draco was quickly falling in love with her, the best piano he had ever played. He wondered if he would be able to take her with him when his time at Hogwarts was finally up. Then he wondered if he would ever really leave this place now that he had found her.

Leaving the Manor hadn't been terribly difficult for Draco once a piano was promised to him at Hogwarts and Minerva confirmed he could continue his weekly mind healing. After all, there were only three rooms in the Manor he cared for: his bedroom, the library, and the music room.

His bedroom at Hogwarts was larger and better appointed than his room at the Manor, and Minerva had even established a secure floo connection to his mind healer's office so that he could visit discreetly without alerting other members of the staff. He thought it might have been the nicest thing she had ever done for him.

As for libraries, the Hogwarts library was the largest magical library in the world. While the Malfoy library was itself rather famous and quite grand, of course it couldn't hold a candle to the collection at Hogwarts.

And Hogwarts had truly outdone itself when it came to pianos. Now that he had discovered his piano named Hermione, there was nothing at all that he missed about the Manor. Not a single thing.

The fact that Granger was here too was a bonus, provided he could remain satisfied with getting nothing from her except conversation and the occasional wank.

Speaking of conversation, Draco had found that she was most open to conversation in the afternoons and evenings during the week. He quickly learned she was a creature of habit, and breakfast was reserved for the papers and the weekends were for puzzles, both jigsaw and crossword. Some careful questioning after their second Sunday together had revealed that the *New York Times* Sunday crossword was something Granger looked forward to every week, and she made a point to do it by herself, in pen, as a matter of personal pride. Her only rule was that she finish it before the next week's crossword arrived.

Granger had an eighty-five week streak going with the Sunday crossword, and she was not intending to break it. It would have to be something truly unbelievable and earth shattering to distract her from it. To Draco's astonishment, that something arrived the following Wednesday.

It started out like any other morning. Draco woke up, showered, dressed in his normal garb for brewing before heading down to breakfast. He eyed Granger's outfit that day appreciatively: she appeared to be wearing a pencil skirt and a sheer blouse with heels that might raise her slight frame to Draco's nose at best. She was still considerably shorter than he was. She was in the middle of making her odd muggle coffee with that chocolate sauce she always added, as he sat down with a "Morning Granger."

She responded with a "Hey Malfoy," as she stirred her coffee and took a sip.

Just then the post arrived, and he saw her look up eagerly for her daily delivery of *The Daily Prophet* and *The Times*. As usual she tossed *The Daily Prophet* aside and unfolded *The Times* first, where she promptly spat out her coffee and gasped at the front page.

Draco, who only pretended to read in the mornings, immediately put his paper down, and he looked over to see Longbottom on her other side do the same thing. Draco had still not said a single word to Longbottom since joining Hogwarts, though they occasionally participated in a strange kind of three-way conversation with Granger in the middle. And as she looked down at the newspaper in horror, Draco couldn't help but look at Longbottom, who stared back at Draco with a look on his face that told him he was just as confused as Draco was.

She was reading frantically, ripping the pages open and muttering, "Oh God, oh God, *oh my God*," and then she threw the muggle paper aside and pulled forward *The Daily Prophet*, which she scanned very quickly before crumpling it up and throwing it with a great, "Sod it all, fucking *wizards!*"

Then she stood quickly, and Draco automatically stood too, as he watched her race over to McGonagall and start to talk frantically to her. Again, he met Longbottom's eye, who just shrugged, but Draco lowered himself and pulled her muggle paper over to him, turning it to the front page, where he stared at the picture with incredulity.

It appeared to be a picture of some sort of explosion, and all it said on the front was "10.02 am September 11, 2001."

Draco opened to an inner page and began to read, horror and disbelief washing over him as he read about some major attack in muggle New York City. He didn't understand all of the jargon of course, but he got the gist of it, and now he knew why Granger had acted the way

she did. He looked over at her worriedly and saw she was still talking seriously to Minerva, gesturing toward the students now. Draco shoved the muggle paper toward Longbottom, who took it with some surprise, while Draco opened his own copy of *The Daily Prophet*. He wasn't terribly surprised to find no mention of the attack at all, which explained Granger's rather colorful oath as she threw her copy away.

A moment later Minerva stood and raised her hand. The students quickly fell silent.

"Attention, please. If there are any students who had family in muggle New York City or muggle Washington, D.C. yesterday, please meet Professor Granger and me in the empty classroom on the other side of the Great Hall."

At this, six students rose and looked around at each other in confusion, but they slowly started to make their way forward. Minerva's lips thinned.

"Very well, professors, these students are excused from class until further notice."

Then he watched as Minerva and Granger headed out of the Great Hall, presumably toward the empty classroom on the opposite side. Without even realizing he was doing it, Draco rose too, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Longbottom stand as well. They both followed, herding the students to the meeting place.

Granger and Minerva looked at him and Longbottom with some surprise when they walked in, but neither of them said anything. Instead, they waited until the students were settled before looking at each other and Minerva spoke.

"Professor Granger has just informed me that muggle news outlets have reported a large scale attack in muggle New York City and Washington, D.C. that has resulted in a number of casualties."

The students went pale. "Where?" asked one girl in a fearful voice, whom Draco knew was a muggleborn third year Hufflepuff.

Granger took over. "It appears that someone or some group hijacked several airplanes while they were in flight and flew two planes into the World Trade Center in New York City. Another plane was flown into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. And yet another crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. You may know that the twin towers of the World Trade Center were the tallest buildings in the world. Unfortunately when the planes flew into them it caused both towers to collapse. *The Times* is reporting that the casualties are... extensive, but as yet not fully known."

"Oh my God," said a fifth year Ravenclaw in disbelief. Granger just nodded.

"Yes, we are going to attempt to contact your families to make sure they are safe. However, given how slow wizarding post can be, I thought it best to do it the muggle way."

This statement struck Draco as very odd.

Wizarding post isn't slow. A letter across the Atlantic only takes a couple days.

The look on Longbottom's face clearly told Draco that he agreed with this sentiment, but to Draco's surprise all of the students were nodding in agreement with Granger.

"Very well," said Minerva. "If you all will please follow Professor Granger, she will take you to a place where you can contact your families. As you may know, muggle methods don't work in Hogwarts, as the magic interferes with them."

Again, the students all nodded, and Granger started to leave again.

"Wait!" Draco cried, and everyone stopped and turned to him.

"I'll come too," he said. "With six students it's best to have another chaperone. I'm sure Professor Slughorn can manage without me while we handle this."

"Me as well," chimed in Longbottom.

Minerva looked at them both and then back at Granger who had an odd look on her face but just shrugged.

"Very well," she finally said. "I'll let Horace and Pamona know you are both helping with this."

They nodded and followed Granger, who started to lead the students out of the front doors.

"Erm, where are we going?" asked Longbottom.

"Hogsmeade," she said simply. "We have to be able to apparate."

The students were all silent and tense as they followed Granger down the steps, across the lawn, around the lake, and finally toward the lane that led to the Hogwarts gates. As soon as they were past the gates she turned to Draco and Longbottom. "If you could help side-along apparate the students, that would be great. The address is 8 Heathgate, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London."

Draco frowned. Something about that address seemed oddly familiar, but he couldn't place it. He shook himself out of it and nodded, while extending his hands to the two closest students. To his displeasure, both girls – one a fourth year and the other a fifth year – blushed as they took his hands. Draco tried not to grimace, but turned and pulled all three of them through the darkness, where they landed with a *CRACK!*

A moment later Granger and Longbottom appeared next to him, with the other four students as well.

Draco looked up at the large home and suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He had been here before. He had been sent on a raid here to capture the muggles that lived here. He had no idea this was Granger's home, but now that he thought about it he realized that it made sense. It hadn't taken him and the others much time to determine that the muggles had moved, so they hadn't lingered long. And sure enough, just as they were leaving, words had magically appeared on the wall in black paint.

"I'm smarter than that."

They had all been bemused by it, having no idea who was writing to them. But now that Draco was staring at the familiar home, he knew *exactly* who had written that message to the Death Eaters. It was Granger. Somehow Granger had known the Death Eaters would be after her family, and she had hidden them before the Death Eaters arrived.

Draco tried to push down a wave of nausea as he watched Granger unlock the front door and open it for everyone to follow her inside. She led them toward a handsome sitting room with a large black box and photos of a man and woman on the mantle that were familiar, now that Draco knew who he was looking at.

Granger picked up something and pointed it at the black box, and suddenly the box came to life. Draco and Longbottom both jumped and stared at it in amazement.

There was an attractive muggle reporting on the attack Draco had read about, and automatically all the students seemed to settle around it to watch. Draco watched too and could hardly believe what he was seeing. Over and over again he saw something fly through the air and hit a tall, rectangular building that then collapsed. And just as the thing the muggle said was an "airplane" hit the building, Draco saw tiny forms that he realized were...

"Oh God, people jumped," said one of the students. Granger looked at them worriedly, as though debating with herself about it, but she kept the box running as she turned and walked into another room.

Instinctively, Draco followed her. He saw her open a silver box and stare inside of it before swearing.

"What is it?" asked Draco.

She spun around to look at him, before sighing. "All I have is muggle beer, a bottle of very cheap wine, and liquor. Harry and I don't drink anything else when we come here. This will probably take us at least through lunch. We'll need to sort something for the students."

Draco nodded. "I'll call my elf. She can pull together something quickly."

Granger gave him a slightly disapproving look at this, but just nodded as she led him back into the room with the students.

"Wait here, I need to get something from upstairs," she muttered, and then she turned and disappeared before returning a few minutes later with a flat, rectangular something. She lifted the lid, and to Draco's surprise he saw all the letters of the alphabet and the numbers, along with punctuation symbols.

"Now then," she said to the students. "We can call or email. Tell me what works best for each of you."

Four students said they wanted to do something called email, and Draco watched in disbelief as Granger wrote a note that appeared on the thing she called a screen and then clicked a

button and declared the note sent.

“I included my phone number so they can call us here once they can get to a phone. Now for those who want to call...”

She led two students over to something that she called a telephone, and Draco and Longbottom watched as she explained something called a “country code,” and the students then took over punching buttons with numbers on it before waiting.

A moment later the student was speaking, “Mum! Oh my God, are you and dad OK? Professor Granger read about it in the news, and she brought us to a muggle home to call you...”

Draco was in shock. This student was *speaking* to her mother on the other side of the ocean? That was impossible.

But as he listened, he was forced to conclude that this was *exactly* what was happening.

“Alright Mum, I’m so glad you two are OK. I’m going to go so the others can use the phone. Love you too. Yes, I’ll tell her. Bye.”

The student pressed a button before handing the thing called a phone to another student who dialed a different set of numbers before...

“No answer. I’ll try again in fifteen minutes.”

Granger nodded and then checked the thing she called email to say, “Miss Harlowe, your father just responded. He says they are safe, though they are stuck in New York. He can’t get a flight out.”

The Hufflepuff sighed in relief. “That’s fine. Mum loves New York. I’m just glad they are OK.”

“But...” sputtered Longbottom.

“But what?” asked Granger.

“But you just sent it! How did it get there so fast?”

To Draco’s consternation, Granger and all six students rolled their eyes.

“I told you, Neville, muggle methods are much faster. Owls are rather antiquated.”

Before Draco or Longbottom could object to this statement, a loud ringing sound made both of them jump violently, though Granger and all of the students seemed to be expecting it. Granger leapt up and raced to the phone.

“Hermione Granger speaking,” she said.

Then she turned to the students. “Mr. Bennett, it’s for you.”

She handed the phone to one of the students who said, “Hello?” and then Draco listened to another one-sided conversation that was apparently taking place across the Atlantic ocean.

After a couple of hours, five of the six students had been able to reach their families. Draco called Sully to bring some lunch to them, and Granger forced them to turn off the box she called a “TV” to give them a break from the news.

She cast worried looks at the one student whose family was still out of touch, but she led them all to a dining room, where Sully laid out sandwiches and pumpkin juice.

“Professor Granger, is this your house?” asked one of the students, as they tucked into the meal.

She just gave them a tight smile. “It used to be, yes. When I was a little girl.”

Draco furrowed his brow at this. He hadn’t noticed any pictures of her in the house, which was a bit odd if she had lived here as a child.

“Do your parents still live here then?” asked another student.

“No,” she said. “They moved a few years ago. We’ve just... kept the house in the family.”

The students all nodded at this, but again Draco thought it was odd. The war had been over for three years. Why hadn’t they come out of hiding?

“What do they do?” asked another.

“They used to be dentists,” she said. “Both of them. They had a practice together. They’re now retired.”

“Ah, that explains why your house is so nice!” said another.

Granger just gave a small smile at this, but Draco couldn’t help but notice the tightness around her eyes.

She’s hiding something. Just like I am.

As the meal wound down, Granger looked around at the students. “Those of you who have heard from your families should go ahead and return to school. Miss Pilcher, I want you to stay here with me until we hear something. Professor Malfoy and Professor Longbottom, would you kindly apparate the others back?”

Draco was hesitant to leave her here, but he nodded his assent and held out a hand for several students to grab. He and Longbottom twisted on the spot and a moment later they were staring up at the Hogwarts gates. Draco led them through the gate and up to the castle. When they got to the entry he said, “Professor Longbottom, can you let Professor McGonagall know about Miss Pilcher? I left something behind and need to return.”

Longbottom looked confused by this, but nodded, and Draco extricated himself from the students before turning around and heading back to Hogsmeade. He wasn’t sure why he was

doing this, but he just had a feeling. He turned on the spot to apparate back to Granger and slowly walked toward the house. He let himself in the front door and was met with the sounds of sobbing. A distraught Annie Pilcher was clinging to Granger like a lifeline, as Granger hugged her and rocked her on the sofa.

Draco's heart sank.

Granger looked at him over her head and just mouthed, "Her mum."

He nodded and slowly sat down on the seat opposite them, relieved that Granger had gotten the other students out before the news of Annie Pilcher's mum had made it here.

He heard Granger murmuring things to her and caught, "I know, I lost my mum too," in the soft words.

At this Draco narrowed his eyes and looked around more carefully. Granger's mum hadn't been killed in the war. He was sure of this, because he would have heard about it. So it had to be something else. As he studied the pictures of the woman who was clearly Granger's mum, he realized there was something odd about many of them. There appeared to be a person missing in all of them. Over and over again, the curly-haired woman and sandy-haired man seemed to be smiling at something that wasn't there or they were positioned off-center, with a hole for someone else.

Draco realized that the missing person, of course, was Granger. But how had she done it?

A recent memory rose in his mind.

"I can be ruthless. Even more so than Harry and Ron at times."

A memory... a *memory*.

Draco's eyes widened as it struck him what she must have done.

Fuck it all she removed herself from their memories.

He looked at her and saw she was still holding Annie and rocking her, but she had also been watching him stare at the pictures and have this revelation. Understanding passed between them, and she gave him a challenging look, which he met.

I don't judge you, he tried to say. You were right to do it. And you were also right that you were smarter than us. You were smarter than all of us.

Something about his thoughts seemed to have made it across face, because her eyes warmed just a bit before dropping to the floor as she hugged Annie tighter.

"Sully," Draco said. His elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Please bring a calming draught and some dreamless sleep potion."

"But master said..." started Sully.

“It’s not for me,” he said quickly.

He saw Granger narrow her eyes at this a little, as the elf nodded and apparated away, returning a moment later with the requested potions.

Granger peeled Annie off of her and quietly talked her into taking the calming draught before leading her upstairs to a large and well-appointed bedroom. Granger pulled the covers back, and Annie laid down as Granger gave her some dreamless sleep. A moment later she was out.

“Merlin,” she muttered as she turned to leave the room.

Draco followed a bit uncertainly.

“She’ll be out until tomorrow morning,” said Granger. “It’s probably for the best. But I’ll need to stay here with her tonight.”

Draco nodded. “I’ll stay too.”

She frowned at him. “You don’t have to, Malfoy. I really appreciate your help today, but I can take it from here.”

He shrugged. “It’s not a problem. And if we need something magical, I can call Sully to help. You can’t.”

She studied him a bit. “Fair enough then. There’s an extra bed upstairs.”

Draco tried not to think about the fact that he wished he could share a bed with *her*, as they made their way back to the sitting room.

“Well since we are here, let’s watch something that’s *not* the news. I hardly ever come here so we might as well take advantage. Tell me. Are you more of an action and adventure type, a horror type, or a romantic comedy type?”

“Pardon?” he asked.

“Movies, Malfoy. After the morning we’ve just had, we’re going to watch a movie. Possibly multiple movies seeing as how we’re going to be here all night. I can’t take any more news right now.”

He shrugged. “I’ve never watched a movie before. You tell me.”

She seemed to study him for a moment.

“We should probably work up to horror or it might give you nightmares. *Notting Hill* it is then,” and she pulled something she called a DVD out of a small case and popped it into another small box, and then something completely different appeared on the TV.

“Malfoy, can I get you beer, liquor, or very cheap wine?”

He smirked a little at this. “Surprise me.”

She narrowed her eyes a bit but left for a moment and returned a bit later with a beer for him and a glass of wine for her. She settled in next to him on the couch and then pressed something on the black stick that made the screen freeze.

“Before we start, you should know something.”

He turned and furrowed his brow. She held something out for him, and he automatically took it.

“You left this here the last time you visited.”

Draco felt the bottom drop out of his stomach as he stared down at the single cufflink with an elaborate M on it. He remembered rolling his sleeves up before this mission, and he had lost a cufflink along the way. He had never been sure where it ended up.

“It was in my bedroom,” she added.

Draco just closed his eyes and tried to breathe.

Fuck she's going to hate me forever.

He opened his eyes and found her watching him a bit sadly.

“Granger I... I swear, I didn't know. He didn't tell us who they were. And I...”

She just held up a hand.

“I figured it had to be something like that. Your behavior at Hogwarts would have been different if you had realized who they were, and your face when we arrived practically confirmed it for me. I just thought we should clear the air about it.”

“If they had been here, I wouldn't have...” he started.

“Yes you would have,” she said simply. “You would have hated yourself for it, but you would have done it. You wouldn't have felt like you had any choice. It would have been them or death for you and your parents. What are a couple muggles you don't know when faced with a choice like that?”

Draco felt his throat closing up.

“I just... fuck Granger, I'm so sorry,” he finally said.

She gave him a sad smile. “I'm sorry too. The war was awful for both of us. It's not fair but it is what it is at this point, and all we can do is move on from it. My parents are still alive. They live in Melbourne. I obliviated them to make them forget that I existed, and then I convinced them to move to Australia before you were sent here to find them.”

Draco just stared at her.

Australia.

It was even worse than he had imagined.

“Fuck,” he said again.

“Quite,” she agreed. “It was painful. It’s still painful. I know where they are, but I haven’t attempted to reverse the memory charm. It’s been more than four years now, and they are happy. I’m not sure I could do it without damaging their brains. But they made it through the war, and they have built a nice life there. I am building my own life here. I have learned to live with it. And I’m telling you this because if we are going to be working together and living next door to each other at Hogwarts for Merlin knows how long, there are a few things we’re going to need to clear up between us along the way. This was one of them. I obliterated my parents. You then came to my house to capture or kill them. Both of us treated them very poorly. But they are safe, and they are unaware of what either of us did.”

“And you...” he said glumly. “I treated *you* poorly.”

“That’s a conversation for another day,” she said. “I think hashing out the things that happened with my parents is enough for now. For what it’s worth, I forgive you for it. I think that what I did to them was far worse in some ways.”

“You forgive me?” he asked in disbelief.

She just nodded. “Yes, I do. I thought you would like to know.”

“I... yes,” he finally said. “Yes, of course. I... I don’t deserve it. I know that.”

She shrugged. “Whether you deserve it or not isn’t really the point. The point is I do forgive you. I don’t resent you for it, not anymore. I know you were in an impossible position, and I also know that you weren’t aware of who they were. I won’t ask you what you would have done if you had known they were my parents, because there’s no way for you to answer that honestly, and it no longer matters. But I saw your face when we arrived at the house, and I could see you remembered. I could tell you hated yourself for it. I thought we should clear the air.”

Draco just found himself nodding, in slight disbelief that she was this forgiving. How could somebody like her be real? And how on earth was she here with Draco?

“Good,” she said, smiling a little. “Now, let’s watch our movie. I have found that there are very few problems in life that Hugh Grant can’t solve.”

“Who’s Hugh Grant?” asked Draco.

“A ridiculously dishy muggle actor. I’d do him in a heartbeat if he knew I existed.”

“For fuck’s sake Granger, I don’t want to think about you doing some muggle bloke.”

“Jealous, Malfoy?” she teased.

He couldn't help but smile a little. "Possibly."

"Hmmm, I can leave a piece of Hugh for you. Don't worry. I'll just get him warmed up for you."

Draco picked up a pillow from the sofa and threw it at her, as she chuckled and started the movie again.

Draco couldn't help it. Despite the horrible events of the morning and the uncomfortable revelation that Granger knew this deep secret of his, he laughed along with her.

Chapter 6: Knickers

Hermione

The sense of cognitive dissonance Hermione was feeling as she watched Draco Malfoy out of the corner of her eye was nearly indescribable. She had gritted her teeth when he asked to come along with the students as an extra chaperone. She had been angry with him for a couple of years after finding his cufflink in her bedroom, which Kreacher confirmed belonged to him. But after meeting him again at Hogwarts, an odd thought had crept in that perhaps he hadn't realized who her parents were. Not that it necessarily excused his actions, but it certainly made them less personal.

His willingness to come to her parents' house and then the look of gobsmacked horror on his face when he saw it confirmed her suspicions. He had been sent as an errand boy and nothing more. She immediately forgave him, especially as she watched him interact with the students and absorb the magnitude of what had happened in the muggle world the previous day.

He had been helpful, she realized. He certainly wasn't as equipped as she was, but he was obviously more comfortable in a muggle household than Neville. Malfoy, surprisingly, seemed to accept the muggle conveniences for what they were once he *knew* what they were. It was strange, to be sure, but then again, she had seen him wear muggle clothing. She knew he had entered this world at least once before.

She waited for him to pull her aside to tell her what he had done when he was a Death Eater, but he didn't, and she watched as the guilt ate at him through the morning and into the afternoon. So when they were finally alone and the opportunity presented itself, she decided to clear the air. She had been hanging onto her anger about it for far too long, and she suspected Malfoy would never get over his guilt now that he knew who the targets had been. It wouldn't help either one of them do their jobs if they didn't address it.

He looked at her with a mixture of incredulity and wonder when she told him she forgave him, and the lightness that had started to develop between them returned in full force.

That's good, she thought. Despite the tragedy that had just taken place, she knew from experience that lightness was the best way to cope with darkness. She strongly suspected she was going to be the person responsible for helping Annie Pilcher learn how to cope with her loss.

But still, it was certainly odd to see Draco Malfoy watching Hugh Grant on her television screen with a look of contempt.

"He is *not* attractive, Granger. His face is grossly asymmetrical."

Hermione surprised both of them when she reached forward and grabbed Malfoy's face in her hands and turned it toward her to study it critically. He let her do it, and his gray eyes twinkled as he arched one eyebrow and settled into his famous smirk.

"There you go, Malfoy. You're asymmetrical too when you do that. It's always your left eyebrow that goes up, you know."

She released him and his jaw dropped, as she just laughed. But a moment later she caught him chuckling too as he sipped his beer.

"So you're saying that if my face was as uneven as this Hugh Grant bloke's, you'd do me too, is that right?"

Hermione felt herself falter just a little, but she recovered quickly.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

He just made a little noise, but didn't meet her eye as he continued to watch the TV. Still, she couldn't help but notice a small smile playing about his lips as he did it.

Notting Hill was followed by a brief wardrobe change for Hermione, who could no longer pretend that she was comfortable sitting on a sofa and binge watching movies while wearing a pencil skirt and blouse. Her clothing options were a bit limited, but she scrounged up a small T-shirt and athletic shorts from the summer before sixth year and settled in for more. Malfoy had cast an amused look her way when he saw it, but he didn't comment, and she just shrugged.

After *Notting Hill* came *Sister Act*, and Malfoy's official review of this was, "So what, these people you are calling nuns are like the muggle version of polyjuice? What the fuck Granger?" Then that was followed by *The Fugitive* ("Fucking finally. Something worth watching.")

Hermione struggled not to laugh as she watched Malfoy turn into a film critic right before her very eyes. If she was being honest with herself, it was the most fun she had had in this house since her parents were obliterated.

Finally, it was time to break for dinner. "There's a good take out place nearby."

"I'll get it," said Malfoy, and to her utter shock he left and returned twenty minutes later with a couple of curries that smelled heavenly.

"God Malfoy, you're full of surprises," said Hermione as she tucked in.

He just smirked and joined her, until it was time to return to the living room, where Hermione broke out the liquor.

"Harry favors scotch," she said as she poured Malfoy a drink. He tried it and looked pleasantly surprised.

"It's not bad. Certainly not as bad as that swill you were drinking earlier."

He had sampled a taste of her wine and immediately spit it out, declaring it to be undrinkable.

“Drink as much as you want. Harry’s had that bottle for a while.”

He sipped as he eyed her curiously. “So did you keep the house so you could watch TV then?” he finally asked. “You said you used to live with Potter.”

She sighed as she poured herself some scotch as settled into the couch too.

“Technically this is Harry’s house. I made my parents forget it so they wouldn’t sell it while they were away. When I found them after the war though... well, they were so happy, and the memory charm I had done was so deep I was afraid they would get brain damage if I tried to reverse it. I decided to sell the house and use the proceeds to pad their retirement a bit. They had always done rather well, but I forced them into retirement much earlier than they planned. Imagine my surprise when my realtor received a shockingly high offer on the house within a week of listing it, and then I saw my best friend at the closing table when it was time to sign the papers.”

She just rolled her eyes as she smiled at this, but she saw Malfoy was looking oddly speculative.

“So Potter bought it for you then.”

She shrugged. “In a manner of speaking. He feels guilty for what I did to them, even though it was my choice. I didn’t even tell him about it until after it was done. But the Order couldn’t protect them, and I couldn’t either since we were going on the run together. I think it was his way of trying to make it up to them and to me. He wanted them to be comfortable, and he didn’t want me to lose my childhood home to make it happen. Harry’s independently wealthy you know, but he knew I never would have accepted his money outright. So he just arranged to buy the house behind my back, and he offered so much for it I couldn’t turn it down. I was a bit annoyed with him when I realized what he had done, but it has worked out. Both of us rather like having a muggle place to go to now and then for television and computers and the things you can’t do easily in the magical world because the magic interferes.”

“Why don’t you live here then? If you like it so much?”

She shrugged. “I would, except we can’t ward it very well. There’s a muggle repelling charm on the property, and I have an alarm ward set to go off if anybody but me or Harry crosses the property line, but that’s all. The electronics wouldn’t work if we warded it more strongly than that, and Harry and I...”

“You both need to live in a place with wards. Yes, of course,” he said simply.

She just nodded. “The press is still relentless all these years later, and of course we both get death threats now and then. We can’t stay in an unwarded place for too long. It’s not safe for either one of us. Most muggleborns do buy a place like this once they are able to though.

Some of the muggle conveniences are wonderful, and doing basic household charms doesn’t create enough ambient magic to interfere with them. It’s the best of both worlds.”

He didn't say anything to this, but turned back to the TV as they turned the news back on. After a long while he said, "It's horrible, what happened."

She looked at him in surprise.

"What?" he asked in a slightly disgruntled voice. "I can appreciate the fact that this was a really big deal in the muggle world. And it's incredibly tragic."

She nodded slowly. "Yes. And of course the wizarding world isn't reporting on it at all. It's infuriating."

"Maybe you should change that," he said quietly.

She gave him a questioning look, and he just shrugged.

"Write to *The Daily Prophet* and tell the editor you think he's a bigoted arse for ignoring something so significant. See if you can get them to start a column on major muggle news. If that doesn't work, then at minimum you could let the muggleborn students know how to get muggle news at Hogwarts. As far as I can tell, you're the only one who gets muggle papers. I'd wager most don't know how to get it delivered to the castle, but clearly there's a way to do it."

Hermione just stared at him, and he gave her a slightly amused smile.

"That's... not a bad idea, Malfoy."

"I'm full of good ideas," he quipped.

"You're full of something, that's for sure."

He gave her his signature smirk, and they didn't speak again until it was time to turn in.

"Come on, I gave Annie the master, but there's a spare room upstairs," she said.

He followed her to the guest bedroom, and she showed him the hall bath with extra towels.

"Harry may have left some clothes behind you can use, or..." she trailed off.

"I'm good Granger, don't worry about it," he said simply. Hermione just nodded, recalling the few times she had seen him in the middle of night he had always been wearing boxers. Evidently Malfoy didn't require pajamas.

She bid him good night, and then shut the door to her room, quickly taking off her bra and too-small shorts for bed, as she sank down into the mattress she so rarely used.

Draco sodding Malfoy.

He had been helpful. He had been empathetic. He had bantered with her for hours, keeping it light to take her mind off the day. She had actually had *fun*. And Merlin if he wasn't too bloody attractive for his own good.

At some point he had taken his own robes off and rolled his shirtsleeves up, eyeing her carefully to see how she would react to his Dark Mark. Her only comment had been, “I bet you wish he had given you a dragon instead,” and he had snorted with laughter and then relaxed, evidently relieved that it didn’t seem to bother her. He hadn’t tried to hide it again, and she had tried to ignore the fact that she found it inexplicably sexy in a dark and dangerous sort of way.

In fact, most everything about Malfoy was sexy. His coloring made him look like he was carved from ice, but when he was talking about polyjuiced nuns and plying her with curry, he radiated nothing but warmth. He was such an odd study of opposites that she couldn’t help but be drawn to it.

And of course the whole time they were chatting, and she was watching his hands hold whatever drink he happened to be on at the moment, she remembered that night she had heard him play the piano. He still hadn’t told her about it, though he had discussed flying spiritedly and had declared her fear of heights to be all Harry’s fault.

“Potter has a death wish on a broom, everybody knows that Granger. That doesn’t mean the entire concept of flying is somehow lacking merit.”

Yes, Hermione liked him. And the part of her brain that had been starved for male attention since her break up with Ron years prior wanted him too. She told herself that it was normal to be attracted to a remarkably handsome bad boy who had evidently reformed. There was nothing wrong with slipping a hand into her knickers and the other under her shirt and trying to give herself just a small taste of pleasure since she would be deprived of it for years to come at Hogwarts. Imagining Malfoy’s hands on her wasn’t somehow inappropriate or disrespectful. They were the same age, and they weren’t long-time friends that would somehow make those thoughts of him taboo. Sure, he had been a horrible bully as a child, but he seemed to acknowledge it. He knew it, and he was trying to move on from it. So touching herself to thoughts of him surely wasn’t *that* forbidden. She would never do it if she thought he was still cruel.

On and on she went until finally, at long last, she broke with a muffled gasp so that the object of her attraction — who was just across the hall — wouldn’t be able to hear. Hermione floated back down to earth after a few blissful moments, and then sighing, she slipped out of the bed and padded across the room to her door. She would just sneak into the loo to clean up, and then she would finally be able to sleep.

Hermione’s door opened with a soft *snick* and she tiptoed out into the hallway, avoiding the loose floorboard that always creaked. Just as she was passing the guest room, which was next door to the loo, Hermione heard a noise and turned to find Malfoy staring at her with wide eyes. As usual he was in his boxers, which she saw were slung low on his hips. And as they stared at each other, she watched his eyes rove over her in the dim light cast by the nightlight in the hallway, taking in every detail from top to bottom. She suddenly, forcefully, remembered what she was wearing.

A too-small T-shirt, no bra, no trousers, knickers that are nearly soaked through thanks to... oh my God.

“Loo,” she whispered, and he gave her a gesture indicating that she should go first. He didn’t step back as she passed him, and she unconsciously inhaled as she drew close enough to smell that wonderful scent she now associated with him. She slipped in, shut the door, and worked quickly to get herself cleaned up before staring at herself in the mirror. There was nothing for it. He had already seen her, and he was waiting.

Sighing, she clicked off the light and opened the door again, and sure enough he was leaning against the doorframe waiting for her. He straightened as she passed him, and then she nearly froze when she felt the softest ghost of a touch along the bottom of her arse, tracing the edge of her knickers. It was so light she couldn’t be sure if she was imagining things or not, but she audibly inhaled as she felt her knickers get wet again.

She was almost certain she heard a whispered, “*fuck me*,” as he stepped into the loo. She could feel him turn around to stare at her, his eyes burning into the back of her neck as she hurried down the hall back to her room, before she finally heard the door shut behind him.

Hermione shut her own door and leaned against it, breathing hard.

Had he touched her or was she imagining things?

It had been so light she wasn’t sure. But the notion that maybe he had made her own hand drop down again, tracing her own knickers until she pushed the fabric aside and felt that familiar slickness that had started all over again. She bit on her lip as she imagined him taking her like that, pressed against the door, his tongue hot and his cock hard. With a low groan she jerked before sinking down on the floor, her head against the back of the door.

It was only then that she heard his door open and close again with a snap.

Bloody hell.

Draco

The encounter with Granger in the hallway that night was sufficient to fuel Draco’s fantasies for several weeks to come. He still wasn’t sure why he was so fixated on her. He had seen any number of beautiful witches naked and willing over the years, and his appetite for sex had been as rich as the next wizard’s, at least until the news made it back to his mother and her matchmaking schemes had tempered his interest.

But something about seeing Hermione Granger in that tiny shirt and knickers had made Draco so hard, he was almost in pain as she brushed past him.

As she got closer, he quietly inhaled her scent — that same blend of verbena, grapefruit, jasmine, and amber that he now associated with her. But this time it was mixed with

something else, and he didn't even need all of the nose training he had done for his potions mastery to identify the smell: it was the scent of her arousal.

Hermione Granger had been wet when she walked past him that night, and it might have been the best damn thing Draco had ever smelled. It took every ounce of his self-control not to shove her against the wall and bury his face in it.

Instead, he had broken his own rule and satisfied himself with the lightest brush against her arse — just something for him to take back, a memory for him to wank to in the weeks to come. But when he did it she inhaled, and Draco's senses — already heightened from that whiff he had gotten — truly went into overdrive when he heard it. It was the sound of a witch asking to be fucked; such a perfect, breathy little noise that Draco was dying to hear it again. He was a musician after all. He responded to sound, and his imagination immediately filled his brain with more gasps and sighs and all the little noises she would make for him if he ever got to touch her the way he wanted to.

On his way out of the bathroom he was about to head into his own room for a much-needed wank, when he noticed an odd shadow under her door. He approached silently and then strained to hear, and sure enough he was rewarded with the faint sounds of Granger taking matters into her own hands, with more of those perfect little catches of breath that came faster and faster until she finished with a faint moan.

Draco would have happily given away half of his gold in Gringotts to have seen it. His hands were in his boxers, stroking himself as he listened at the door, not even caring if she opened it to find him lurking there. When he finally heard her slide down into a heap on the floor, he silently moved away again and then went into his own room to finish what he had started in the hallway.

Yes, the memory of the sights and sounds and scents of Granger that night was enough to fuel weeks of self-care for Draco, as his imagination took over, and he considered every place in the castle he wanted to fuck her.

He had been pleasantly surprised to find her acting totally normal the following morning, and he had followed her lead as he ran to a nearby bakery for some breakfast before escorting poor Annie Pilcher back to Hogwarts. There, he and Granger had filled Minerva in on nearly everything that had happened, and she was so distracted by her concern for Annie that she didn't seem to register the fact that Draco had spent the night too. Not that she could have done anything about it — surprisingly, there were no explicit rules prohibiting this in the staff handbook — but Draco was relieved that his boss didn't seem suspicious of his time spent at Granger's home. Instead, she was nothing but complimentary about Draco's willingness to help, especially when he offered to refer Annie to his mind healer.

Granger, unsurprisingly, had been assigned to help Annie navigate the death of her mother, and she had been absent here and there for a couple weeks afterwards as she did so. Draco knew she had broken her crossword puzzle streak as part of it, but Granger had just smiled and said that some things were more important than a silly competition she held with herself.

But eventually she returned to Hogwarts, and they settled back into their routine of papers, puzzles, and pianos, though Draco couldn't help his eyes from following her a little more

often than usual. He fully leaned into his desire for her while he stroked himself to that memory each night. And when she did tear herself away from her papers and puzzles long enough to chat with Draco, he sensed more warmth now, which he attributed to their understanding about her parents. Through all of it, he couldn't help but gently tease her and needle her, just to see that pretty blush rise in her cheeks and her sharp wit come out to match him.

Yes, Draco was becoming fixated on her. And in the spirit of embracing uncomfortable truths, he finally decided he needed to own up to it, at least to Healer Robinson. This was a bit off the beaten path for them, but Draco was sure his healer had a whole file on Granger somewhere. He needed an outside perspective.

"Draco," said Healer Robinson as Draco stepped through the floo.

"Healer Robinson," said Draco, taking his usual seat on the other side of his desk.

The healer sat back and studied Draco for a moment before pouring himself a drink and offering one to Draco too.

Healer Robinson didn't drink in front of most of his patients, but he often did with Draco. They had been seeing each other for so long their sessions were more like check-ins now instead of intensive healing, and they had become friends despite their age difference. Besides, alcohol had never been Draco's self-medication of choice. It was safe for him to drink it.

A small smile crossed Healer Robinson's face as he surveyed Draco. "You're looking well," he said. "Hogwarts suits you."

Draco returned the small smile. Healer Robinson had truly seen Draco at his worst, and over the years Draco had come to respect the hell out of the older man. He was nearly twenty years older than Draco, with dark hair and piercing blue eyes behind glasses. Draco knew he was a muggleborn, though he had married a witch ten years previously, and they had two children, the oldest of which would be starting at Hogwarts in a couple years.

"So what's on deck for today?" asked the healer.

Draco hesitated and the healer gave him a sharp look.

"It's... a witch. At Hogwarts."

Healer Robinson's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. They had never talked about this sort of thing very much. Healer Robinson knew about Draco's family pressures of course, and he was aware that Draco had slept around pureblood circles. They had also discussed some of his sexual kinks when Draco started to worry that he only liked those things because he used to be a Death Eater. But once Healer Robinson assured himself that Draco wasn't doing anything stupid with his partners, and he also confirmed for Draco that his kinks were perfectly normal, they had only focused on the pressures from his parents when it came to romance.

“A witch,” he repeated.

Draco nodded.

“Not one of your students...?”

“Fuck no,” said Draco in horror, and Healer Robinson’s mouth quirked in amusement.

“I had to ask. You’re not that much older than the seventh years.”

Draco just grimaced. “I probably should talk to you about that at some point, but later.”

Robinson inclined his head. “So not a student. A member of the staff then.”

Draco nodded. “Yeah, she’s my age. Or was. She had a birthday recently.”

Robinson’s eyes narrowed for a moment before they widened, and Draco winced.

“Go ahead. Tell me I’ve lost my fucking mind. I know I have.”

To Draco’s surprise, Robinson sat back and furrowed his brow as he thought about it.

“Have you apologized to her?” he finally asked.

Draco shifted uncomfortably, but told him about her parents. “So I did apologize for that, yeah. As for the other things... well, I haven’t really found the words. But our rooms share a wall, and when she has nightmares I can hear them, and I wake her up.”

Healer Robinson went very still.

“She lets you into her room to wake her up from nightmares?”

Draco nodded. “She used to live with Harry Potter, and apparently they did that for each other. So I suppose I’m her replacement for Potter at Hogwarts.”

“I never got the impression that she was romantically interested in Potter,” said Robinson slowly. “Despite what *The Prophet* reported.”

Draco shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Potter’s engaged, actually.”

Robinson’s eyes got wide.

“I know,” said Draco. “They’re keeping it quiet. But no, I think he’s been with Ginny Weasley since the war ended. Never Granger.”

“You call her Granger,” observed Healer Robinson.

Again, Draco shifted uncomfortably. “Well yeah. We always went by last names in school.”

“But you didn’t want a relationship with her in school.”

“I don’t know that I want a relationship with her now,” retorted Draco. “I just want to shag her. She’s hot.”

Now Healer Robinson gave him a sharp look. Again, Draco shifted uncomfortably.

“You know that I don’t hold punches, Draco. That’s never been my approach.”

Draco nodded. It was true, and it was one of the reasons he had continued with Healer Robinson after his Ministry-mandated mind healing was done. Healer Robinson was kind, but blunt. He never tried to coddle Draco or shield him from the difficult things he needed to hear or process.

“In the three plus years you’ve been coming to see me, you’ve never once wanted to talk about a specific witch. We have discussed your family’s expectations about your romantic life extensively, of course. I am aware that you spent a good deal of time sewing your wild oats in pureblood circles after the war. But you have never given me a name.”

Draco grimaced. He knew this was true.

“Well I’ve never wanted to shag somebody who was tortured in my home,” he finally said. “I know she’s too good for me, and she probably resents me so I don’t expect anything to happen. But I need to find a way to cope with it if I’m going to be living next door to her and sharing meals with her three times a day and...”

“You share meals too?” interrupted Healer Robinson.

Draco nodded. “Yeah, we normally sit next to each other for meals.”

“And does she sit next to anybody else?”

Draco shrugged. “Neville Longbottom occasionally. He’s clearly into her and carrying a torch for her. I expect she’ll end up with him eventually, which is even more of a reason I need to figure out how to deal with this.”

Healer Robinson cocked his head. “Does she seem interested in Neville?”

Draco shrugged. “She said she’s not, but I think she was surprised by it. I imagine she will come around once she has time to get used to the idea. She’s definitely friendly with him. He went to her parents’ house that day too.”

“Did he spend the night?”

“No, but I sort of... waylaid him.”

Healer Robinson’s lips twitched at this.

“Does she spend free time with Neville? Does she let him into her room?”

“I... no, actually,” said Draco. “In fact, he’s warded out of her room.”

Healer Robinson gave him a piercing look at this.

“What do you mean he’s warded out of her room?”

Draco bit his lip. “I may have done a blood ward for her around her door. Just for privacy, you know, and safety. At the time I didn’t realize how good she is in defense, and I was a little worried the older Slytherins would try something. So we warded everybody else out.”

“You warded everybody else out. So you’re the only person who can get into her room other than her?”

“Well, technically my parents could too. Blood wards are based on lineage. But I did one that’s narrow enough to only include direct descendants and ancestors.”

Healer Robinson studied him for a bit. “That’s dark magic, Draco. You know we’ve talked about your... history with that.”

Draco felt a little uncomfortable now, but he nodded. “Yeah, but we’ve also talked about dark magic being circumstantial. Is it really dark if it’s for somebody’s protection? Sure, blood wards were traditionally used to ward out muggleborns and half-bloods, but we incorporated her blood into it too. I know she’s not opposed to dark magic if the circumstances warrant it. And blood wards are very effective.”

“Explain what you mean – she’s not opposed if circumstances warrant it,” said Healer Robinson.

“This is all confidential, right?” asked Draco.

Draco got the impression that Healer Robinson was struggling not to roll his eyes. “Yes, Draco. Everything we talk about is confidential. I’m magically bound not to repeat it.”

Draco nodded. “In that case... she obliviated her parents to remove their memories of her to send them into hiding during the last year of the war. They live in Australia.”

Healer Robinson physically jolted at this. “Excuse me? She did what?”

“She obliviated her parents. They don’t know they have a daughter.”

“Still?” he asked incredulously.

Draco shrugged. “Apparently she did it really well. She told me she found them, and they were happy. She was afraid that reversing it would cause brain damage, so she’s never tried. They live as muggle retirees in Melbourne. I know she feels guilty about it, but she has learned how to live with it. And yes it was definitely dark magic, but it saved their lives. They would have been captured if she hadn’t done it. *I* would have helped capture them.”

At this Healer Robinson leaned back and contemplated Draco for a long while.

“You know Draco, I was skeptical at first, but I actually think she’s perfect for you.”

“I... what?” asked Draco, totally thrown off.

“Sure,” said Healer Robinson, shrugging his shoulders. “You two both made some questionable choices in the war, and you’ve both learned how to cope with them as best you can. Those kinds of common experiences are rare, and they can bring a couple closer together. She clearly doesn’t hate you if she lets you into her room when she’s warded out every other person in the castle. It may take time to really build trust with her, and I suspect you’ll need to apologize for the other things at some point, but it sounds like you are well on your way. And you are physically attracted to her. Both of you have few other reasonable options for that kind of closeness, given where you work.”

“She has Longbottom,” Draco interjected.

“You said yourself that she’s not interested in him and even warded him out. Think about that, Draco. She chose to ward out a very old friend of hers and instead let in her childhood bully.”

“I...” Draco paused. He really hadn’t thought of it that way before. Then he continued. “I think it’s because I’m next door.”

“But still, it’s what she chose to do,” said Healer Robinson reasonably. “And whatever her feelings are toward you, they are clearly not so negative that she’s unwilling to let you help.”

“But her nightmares are from Malfoy Manor,” said Draco softly. “It’s just... she screams just like she did that day.”

Healer Robinson looked sympathetic. “I don’t imagine it’s easy for either one of you. But as we have discussed before Draco, *you* did not torture her. There were others in the room who could have and should have stopped it.”

“I should have tried,” said Draco.

“Perhaps,” said Healer Robinson. “But you were in a tough position yourself. It would have been four or five against one if you had tried. And if you talked to her about it, I’d wager she agrees with me. She doesn’t seem to have a problem interacting with you after she dreams about it does she?”

Draco slowly shook his head.

“She seems to be processing it in her own way then. And you have to allow her the space to do that. The fact that she trusts you enough to help in the immediate aftermath of her nightmares is very encouraging. And as you build more trust with her, you may even offer her a more permanent solution.”

“You mean my potion,” said Draco. He had wondered if Healer Robinson was going to bring this up.

Healer Robinson inclined his head. “Yes, I know it’s still being trialed, Draco, but she sounds like an excellent candidate for it. As you build a rapport with her it’s something you may

want to discuss with her at some point. I don't know Miss Granger personally, but based on her reputation and what you have told me today... she seems like the type to be willing to try something experimental. You and I both know it works very well."

Draco nodded and then bit his lip. Healer Robinson caught it immediately of course.

"What is it?" he asked.

Draco shrugged. "I know how this is going to sound, but if I offer her the potion and she takes it then..."

"You won't have an excuse to go into her room at night," finished Robinson.

"Merlin I'm a bastard," said Draco, as he put his face into his hands and nodded. "She's just... she's so open after a nightmare. And it's like I can finally help her a little bit, even though I didn't help her that day. And the way she dresses at night... fuck me."

To his surprise he heard Healer Robinson chuckle a little. "Draco, if I were a betting man I'd say that if you gave her the thing that stopped her nightmares, she would fall right into your arms."

Draco's hands dropped from his face as he looked up swiftly.

"You think?"

Healer Robinson nodded. "I do. I think a sincere apology and discussion about that day, along with a solution that allows her to finally move on from it, would be just the ticket. Though I would caution you against viewing all of this through the lens of sex."

"What do you mean?" asked Draco.

"Just that Miss Granger is powerful. She's famous. She's also been hurt and has hurt others too. All of those things apply to you as well. And I think this could be a lot more than just sex if you are open to it. I think you two can help each other, perhaps in ways that others can not. So you should prepare yourself to become emotionally attached to her if you decide to pursue her. I don't think that's a bad thing at all, but you don't want to be blindsided by it."

"So you're saying I shouldn't sleep with her unless I want to date her too?"

Healer Robinson shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with casual sex between two consenting adults. But based on what I know about her, she's never really struck me as the type. And based on what I know about *you*... I think you've moved on from it. You never would have taken the job at Hogwarts if you were still very interested in that."

"But you think I *should* try to date her," clarified Draco.

"I think you should apologize to her. You should build trust with her. At minimum, you have to work with her for the next two years, and sorting out the negative things in your past should make your work situation more comfortable. And then you should see where things go and consider what it might mean to have a real relationship with somebody like her before

you try to get her into bed. That being said, I do not think you should just assume that Neville Longbottom is the answer to Miss Granger's loneliness. She is more than capable of making up her own mind about that sort of thing, so I think you should believe her if she says she's not interested. Similarly, if she is willing to forgive you for the things you have done, I think you should trust her judgment and let her do it."

Draco sat back as he absorbed all this. "I... I'm going to need to think about it."

"Of course," said Healer Robinson. "There is absolutely no rush to start something. You may consider it and decide you really aren't interested in a relationship with her. That's as valid a choice as any. But I do think you should view it through the lens of a relationship, instead of just sex. You two are similar enough that it may very well turn into that. You should be prepared for it before you pursue anything with her."

Draco nodded slowly as he rose. "Alright. I'll try to think about it that way then. I don't know. I mean, she's just... Merlin, she's both incredible and infuriating."

Healer Robinson smiled a little at this. "Yes, many of the best relationships are."

Draco just raised his eyebrows at this before moving to the fireplace and throwing in some floo powder. "Hogwarts, Draco Malfoy's room!" he shouted, and a moment later he was spinning away, back to Hogwarts and that fascinating but entirely perplexing curly-haired witch.

Chapter 7: Inner Eye

Hermione

After much reflection about that odd evening at her parents' house, Hermione had all but decided she must have been imagining things when she thought Malfoy had brushed her arse.

She eventually decided that her senses had been overdrive, and in that moment she was looking for something that wasn't there. Alternatively, if he *had* touched her it must have been accidental. There was no way somebody like Draco Malfoy would look twice at Hermione. Sure, he seemed to be reformed now, but he was still solidly entrenched in pureblood circles. His name had been linked to any number of pureblood witches over the previous few years, and though Hermione was always a bit skeptical about that sort of reporting, she had to acknowledge it was at least partially true when she pulled out some back issues of *Witch Weekly*. Over and over again, there were snapshots of him with some beautiful pureblood on his arm, whether it be an event at the Ministry of Magic or his mother's famed New Year's Eve ball. Draco Malfoy always had a date - and the dates were always different - but the common denominator between them all was blood purity.

Hermione tried not to let this disappoint her. After all, having a pure bloodline didn't necessarily mean one was prejudiced anymore. The Weasleys were a perfect example of that. And even if Malfoy himself didn't care, his parents surely did. She knew there would be a lot of family pressure for him to fall in line on that point, and she couldn't very well resent him for wanting to keep the peace at home.

After much consideration, Hermione decided she had simply had a moment of weakness that night at her parents' house. A lot had happened that day. She and Malfoy had been thrown together in a stressful and awful situation, and he had lightened it for her considerably. There was nothing wrong with what she had done, but it really shouldn't happen again because those kinds of fantasies would surely lead to disappointment. She thought about it for several weeks and eventually came up with a plan. She resolved to maintain a professional, but friendly relationship with him. Surely she could keep any twinges of feeling or bodily impulses under control. If she needed a sexual release, she could look at glossy magazines of nameless blokes. She wouldn't, absolutely *wouldn't* picture the wizard who slept next door to her.

Decision made, she continued to interact with him, but she vowed to keep any thoughts of him chaste and platonic. Sure, he might be witty, sharp, and remarkably observant - and it's true those were qualities that she had always found attractive. But as she continued to remind herself, it wouldn't do either of them any favors if she thought of him as more than a friend.

It's never going to happen Hermione.

Of course, that didn't mean it was always easy.

“Evening Granger,” he said, as he walked into the staff room one night.

“One second Malfoy, I’m almost done with the border...”

Hermione was concentrating hard, trying to find that last, elusive border piece when she finally spotted it.

“Aha!” she exclaimed triumphantly as she snatched it and put it into place. She sat back and studied it with a satisfied air. “That’s enough for tonight then I suppose.”

Malfoy looked amused. “You and your puzzles.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” she retorted. “It’s not like television works here.”

“True,” he acknowledged. “Though after that drivel you made me watch at your parents’ house, I’m not sure I trust your taste in television.”

Hermione just scoffed. “I have exquisite taste, Malfoy.”

He just smirked at her as she grabbed a drink and settled in on one of the sofas near the fireplace across from him.

“Do you think you have all the pieces this time then? It seems you’re always missing one.”

Hermione huffed. It was true. She had had a bad streak recently with her puzzles. There was always a piece missing at the very end.

“Well I usually buy them from charity shops. I go through so many it's senseless to buy them new. Missing pieces is always a risk when you do it that way. But this one... I got it from a charity shop too, but the box was still sealed. So all of the pieces should be in it this time.”

She gave him a satisfied look at that, but he just raised an eyebrow in amusement. “I suppose we’ll see Granger. I admit, I’ve been waiting to see what one of your puzzles looks like when it’s actually complete.”

She frowned. “Even with a piece or two missing you can tell.”

“Sure, but it’s rather... unsatisfying isn’t it?”

He gave her full-blown Malfoy smirk at this that made Hermione harrumph. But she didn’t contradict him. He was right of course.

“This time all the pieces will be there. I just know it,” she said firmly.

He didn’t say anything to this, but gave her a politely skeptical look that made her roll her eyes. They sat there in silence for a few minutes until Hermione said, “Malfoy, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

He raised his eyebrows in question.

“You know David Fawley? First year Gryffindor?”

“The kid who's a dead ringer for Potter, yeah,” nodded Malfoy. “Except for the eyes of course.”

“Yes, exactly,” said Hermione, a bit relieved somebody else had noticed it too. “He told me on the first day of class that he’s supposed to be related to Harry. I told him to come to office hours to talk about it, but he never did. They look *so* much alike it’s almost believable, but then again... I know Harry’s dad was an only child.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed at this a bit. “He does remind me of Potter at that age. And his potions skills are distinctly mediocre, just like Potter’s were.”

Hermione was torn between amusement and exasperation. “Harry wasn’t exactly a favorite student in potions, you know. Though to be fair... David’s transfiguration is rather mediocre too. Then again, I’ve heard from John that his defense work is very good. That was always Harry’s best subject, until I caught him up in transfiguration at any rate.”

Malfoy made a gesture as though reluctantly acknowledging this.

“I’m just wondering if it’s even possible. James Potter was a pureblood.”

Malfoy leaned back and seemed to think about this. “Fawley is an old surname,” he said slowly. “They’re Sacred 28.”

“What does that mean?” asked Hermione in confusion.

Malfoy just rolled his eyes. “One of Theo Nott’s ancestors wrote a book back in the twenties about the families who were still pure at that time. He decided there were twenty-eight families who met his criteria for it, and he named them the Sacred 28. It’s a load of tosh of course. Some of the families had members marry out, and others like the Potters were probably excluded because of their pro-muggle leanings. But it was one of those things that caught on in pureblood circles.”

“I suppose Malfoy is Sacred 28 then,” said Hermione, trying not to allow herself to feel glum about it.

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. “Yes. Like I said, it’s mostly bullshit, though I’ll admit Malfoy has been purer than other lines. In most generations there was a single male heir born. There was a second or third child now and then, but it wasn’t very common.”

Hermione just stared at him, not exactly sure what to make of this. He shifted a bit uncomfortably and said, “But back to Fawley. Like I said, it’s an old name. Hold on, let me think.”

He closed his eyes as though trying to visualize something.

“Alright. James Potter’s father was Fleamont Potter. He was the oldest son in that generation. He had a much younger sister though — I want to say her name was Amelia. She married into the Shafiq family and had a girl named Anastasia. Anastasia Shafiq married

Cartenius Fawley. I heard they had a son about the time I was starting at Hogwarts so that would have been around eleven years ago.” He opened his eyes to look at her. “It all checks out. David Fawley is Potter’s second cousin.”

Hermione just stared at him.

“What?” he asked in amusement.

“How on *earth* do you know all that?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “Standard fare as a member of the pureblood elite, Granger,” he said a bit pompously. “My tutor trained me in reading, writing, arithmetic, French, Latin, art, blood magicks, deportment, and lineage. I started from the age of four and lessons continued in the summers up until the war.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “That has to be the *most* poncey thing I’ve ever heard you say, Malfoy.”

He looked totally unabashed by this and just grinned at her. “Alright then, what did you study as a child then, Granger?”

She rolled her eyes. “Standard national curriculum of course. Reading, writing, mathematics, science, geography, history, French, arts, religious education, and physical education.”

He just stared at her now. “And you say I’m poncey. What the hell is physical education?”

Hermione was amused despite herself. “I’m rather surprised you’re not asking about religious education.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “I know about muggle religions, or the most common ones at any rate.”

Hermione was totally thrown off by this. “Pardon?” she asked.

Malfoy just rolled his eyes. “Art, Granger. I studied art and architecture. You can’t learn about art without learning about muggle religion too. I’m incredibly cultured, you know.”

Hermione just rolled her eyes at him now, and he gave her an arrogant smile.

“Fine, Mr. Culture. What about science then? Why didn’t you ask about that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really know much about it, but I do know it’s a kind of muggle version of magic. I’m not surprised you studied it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “A muggle version of magic?”

He nodded. “Sure. Your television and cars and all sorts of other mad muggle things are because of science.”

"Hmph," she said, narrowing her eyes now.

He smirked again. "So back to my question. What's physical education?"

Hermione shrugged. "Pretty much what it sounds like. It encompasses muggle sports and the study of the human body. It includes sex education too in later years."

Malfoy was gaping at her now. "Sex education? They teach muggle children about that?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Of *course* Malfoy. In fact, I've always found it shocking that we don't teach this at Hogwarts."

"All you have to do is get a potion from Pomfrey though," said Malfoy, grinning now. "Sex education solved."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, well, that message gets lost now and then. And in any event, failure to talk about it makes sex both very taboo and also very appealing to teenagers *because* it's so taboo. But there's no education about the physical things that happen when you do it or the emotional triggers in the brain that can be tripped from it. On any given day there's at least one teenage witch at Hogwarts crying in a loo somewhere because she slept with a wizard and wasn't prepared for how it feels or what it would do to her emotions."

Malfoy just stared at her now, with a very curious look on his face. "So you're saying sex is always emotional then?"

Hermione shrugged. "Certainly not always, but I think it can get emotional more often than we might want to acknowledge. That's especially true for young witches who have no idea what to expect because the only thing they've ever been told is 'go get the potion from Pomfrey. She won't ask questions.' But that's a far cry from a real education, and it also assumes the witch knows *why* she's supposed to go to Pomfrey in the first place. I mean, Lavender Brown absolutely insisted that babies came from the fairies until she was sixteen years old. She didn't know that babies came from having sex, and I had to practically drag her to Pomfrey myself to get her on the potion after her first time. I'm not saying that muggles always do a great job of educating about sex, but at least there's an acknowledgment that it happens."

Malfoy sat back and surveyed her now.

"What?" she asked, feeling a bit self-conscious under his gaze.

He shrugged, but there was a teasing smile on his face. "I just can't help but wonder if you would be qualified to teach something like sex education."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'm sure most of us would be qualified to teach it, at least to some degree."

He cocked his head. "How many then?"

"How many what?" she asked in confusion.

“How many wizards have you slept with? Seeing as how you have very strong feelings about this.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Trying to get details about my sexual history, Malfoy?”

He smirked. “I’m curious, sure. You were always such a swot and so uptight growing up I never would have guessed before this year that you had much experience. But I’ll admit you’ve surprised me. So let’s hear it, Granger.”

Hermione felt herself reddening. The conversation had taken a turn she was *not* expecting. But she couldn’t very well not answer him. He would be relentless.

“Fine. Wizards? One.”

He stared at her. “Just one? You’ve only slept with one bloke after all your talk?”

“I’ve slept with one *wizard*. I’ve had a few other muggle partners.”

His eyes gleamed at this a bit. “I thought you said your muggles weren’t serious.”

“And they weren’t,” she acknowledged. “That’s how I learned that casual sex is not for me.”

His eyes narrowed again. “So your wizard wasn’t casual then?”

“It was Ron, if you must know,” she said bluntly.

Malfoy just grimaced. “Figures,” he muttered.

Hermione shrugged. “Exactly. Nothing was casual with Ron. Everybody thought we would get married one day. But we weren’t right for each other, and even though the sex with the muggles was objectively better...”

At this Malfoy’s face lit with glee.

“Oh stop it,” she admonished. “Ron and I were young. Of *course* the sex wasn’t that great. But I’m saying that even though the sex was *better* with the muggles, it felt like something was missing with them too because I knew that’s all it would ever be. I never cared about them enough to tell them I’m a witch. It was all very surface level. That works for some people, but I found it dissatisfying. And that’s the sort of thing that could be helpful in sex education. There are a lot of different appetites for sex. None of them are wrong, but it’s important to find somebody whose preferences are compatible with yours if you don’t want to end up crying in a loo somewhere.”

He gave her an amused look at this before settling back to contemplate her again. “Alright,” he said slowly. “So you’re not the type for casual sex. I’ll admit that doesn’t really surprise me.”

She shrugged, but then looked at him pointedly. “I’d guess you *are* the type for it.”

He raised his eyebrows. "I used to be, certainly. I've had my fair share. But I've been advised that perhaps I should seek a relationship next time."

Hermione's glum feeling from earlier promptly returned. "Yes, of course. A solid foundation with somebody who shares key similarities with you is always a good first step."

He just nodded. "That's what I've been told. And I'll admit, my forays into casual sex came to an abrupt halt once my mother found out about it and tried to set me up with the witches in question for real."

Hermione stared at him and then suddenly snorted and was clutching her stomach with laughter.

"What?" said Malfoy, clearly both annoyed and amused by her reaction to this news.

"It's just..." she gasped. "Narcissa. And you. And oh my God, I can picture it."

Malfoy gave her a reluctant smile despite himself. "Yes, well, my mother is many things but subtle is not one of them. When she invited Anabelle Rawlins to dinner not forty-eight hours after I shagged her, that was my first clue that she was on to me."

Hermione was confused. "Who?"

"Anabelle Rawlins," said Malfoy, shrugging. "She's a pureblood. Quite a few never go to Hogwarts. They enroll in international schools or they are educated at home."

"Oh, of course," said Hermione, feeling down again. She knew she shouldn't ask this, but she couldn't help herself. "So Anabelle Rawlins – pretty then, I take it?"

He gave her a sharp look. "Attractive enough for a shag, yeah. I mean, her tits were oddly uneven, but I suppose you can't have everything."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Oh my *God!*"

He gave her a wicked laugh. "Relax, Granger. It was one time, and she was so bloody boring I couldn't bring myself to do it again. I mean, she has no brains in her head at all. Not that Mother minded. She thought Annabelle would be a perfectly wonderful Lady Malfoy, and if I liked her enough to shag her I must surely be interested."

Malfoy rolled his eyes at this.

"Lady Malfoy?" asked Hermione hesitantly.

"Yeah, there's a title," he said.

"Bloody hell."

"Believe me, I've said the same thing. It makes the whole 'sire an heir' thing a much bigger deal than it otherwise would be. The way my mother behaves... it's enough to send anybody off their rocker."

Hermione was curious now, despite herself. “Is that why you ended up at Hogwarts then? You’re trying to escape your duty to the title?”

He shifted a bit uncomfortably and shrugged. “I don’t know about shirking duty, but I’m only twenty-one. Mother thinks I should be married by now. But I just... I wanted to do something for myself first. I’m not that fussed about the title to be honest, and if I decide to make good on my duty one day, there’s plenty of time for it.”

Malfoy looked uncomfortable enough by this confession that Hermione allowed him to switch the subject to safer waters. But later that night she couldn’t help but stand in front of her mirror without her top on, as she idly wondered whether *her* tits were even enough for the Malfoy heir to appreciate them.

Draco

Hermione Granger was not interested in casual sex.

This was Draco’s key takeaway from what had to be one of the most fascinating conversations he had ever had with her. This tidbit was not, in itself, terribly surprising. After all, Granger had had at least one serious boyfriend in the past. Her relationship with Ron Weasley had been nothing short of famous when the news broke, and the reporters had followed them breathlessly until one day they released a mutual statement to say that the fairytale had ended. Healer Robinson had warned him about this of course, and Draco had been forced to acknowledge that Healer Robinson was probably correct that Granger wasn’t the casual sex type. Hearing it confirmed, however, sent Draco’s own thoughts into a bit of a spiral.

Draco himself had never had a very serious relationship before. The closest thing he had ever had to a serious girlfriend was Pansy Parkinson at the end of fifth year, which lasted through the first full month of sixth year before Draco’s mission for the Dark Lord intervened, and he cut her off. Pansy had gotten many of his firsts – she had been his first kiss as well as his first shag – though after the conversation with Granger, Draco now felt a bit guilty about that last thing. They had danced around each other for a long time after he asked her to the Yule Ball, and then he finally he worked up the courage to snog her in the Slytherin common room late one night in the spring of fifth year. Things progressed from there until *she* finally made it “official.” But soon after becoming Marked, he pushed her away. He didn’t have time for a girlfriend, and if he was going down he didn’t want to bring her down with him. Pansy had never really forgiven him for choosing the Dark Lord over her. And ever since, he had steadfastly refused to label *anything* with a witch because his break-up with Pansy had felt needlessly difficult, and he didn’t want his mother getting any bright ideas.

The differences between Draco Malfoy at sixteen and Draco Malfoy at twenty-one were nothing short of astonishing. But despite his many changes, the Draco Malfoy of today still

didn't know *how* to start a relationship with a witch or how to maintain one, assuming he got it off the ground in the first place. After his conversations with both Healer Robinson and Granger herself, Draco was forced to admit that he truly stood no chance in sampling Granger's goods unless he was prepared to be in a relationship with her too. And if Healer Robinson was to be believed, even if Draco convinced Granger to try something casual to start, he would probably fall for her anyway, and then he would end up in the same place. Draco had to be sure.

The problem, of course, was that this was *Granger*. She was a muggleborn, which didn't bother Draco, but he thought it would be a hurdle with his parents. And she wasn't just any muggleborn, but the most famous one in Britain. Any relationship with her would be just as closely followed as her relationship with Weasley, if not more so, given who he was. Not only that, but they worked together. Even if Draco did manage to have a relationship with her, what would happen if they broke up? Would they be able to stand to sleep next door to one another? Would they still chat during meals and in the common room at night? Or would Draco lose his closest friend at Hogwarts if that happened? Because Draco had finally acknowledged and accepted that she *had* become a friend, even if this fact was another uncomfortable truth about her. And none of these concerns even touched upon their shared history together.

From Draco's vantage-point, a real relationship with Hermione Granger would be fraught with difficulty, so much so that Draco thought he must be mad to even consider it.

But consider it he did.

He couldn't help but be fascinated by her. She was beautiful of course, but more than that she was absolutely brilliant. Draco had always known she was very smart in a bookish way, but as she grew up her intelligence manifested itself in other ways too. She was intuitive. She was perceptive. She had an emotional intelligence that he, as a former member of Slytherin House, greatly valued. Compared to Annabelle Rawlins, she was a fucking goddess.

So yes, Draco thought about it. And as he thought about it he talked to her more often. He flirted with her to draw out that pretty blush. He needled her and said slightly inappropriate things to her because he loved to watch her roll those golden eyes. He kept stealing her puzzle pieces every time she told him the box was unsealed when she bought it, just to get a rise out of her and see how long it would take her to figure it out. He truly couldn't wait to get caught and see what she would do.

Everything he learned about her made him utterly fascinated. But even with his close study of her there were also things about her that he still hadn't quite worked out, and something about that fact made her even *more* interesting than ever. Evidently Draco liked a good puzzle too.

At the top of his list was her uncanny ability to catch students out of bed.

"I got four last night," she said casually as Draco dropped into the chair next to her at breakfast. "Two in the trophy room of all places. They were easy enough. But then I also caught two in the passage beneath the statue of that one-eyed witch in the Defense corridor. I

must admit I almost gave them points for figuring out how to get in, but seeing as how they were half undressed I was forced to take points instead.”

Draco just stared at her. “I didn’t know there *was* a secret passage beneath that statue.”

She gave him an arrogant smile. “There is. It goes to the cellar at Honeydukes.”

“And how in the name of Merlin’s saggy ballsack did you find it?”

“Oh *honestly* Malfoy,” she said with that eye-roll Draco had come to love so much. “Not necessary. As for how I learned about it, how do you think?”

“Potter,” he sighed.

She inclined her head. “Harry was never one for the rules.”

“And you went along with him,” said Draco.

“Well if I didn’t, Voldemort would have won, he and I would both be dead, and you would be siring Malfoy heirs upon Voldemort’s command instead of your mother’s.”

Draco gave her an appalled look. “Right little ray of sunshine you are today.”

She just smiled serenely. “My point is that of course I went along with it. And I may have picked up a few things along the way.”

“Fine, but that doesn’t explain how you knew to check there. Surely it’s not on your usual route.”

She gave him a mischievous look. “Call it... intuition.”

Something about the look on her face struck Draco as entirely dishonest.

“Bullshit,” he said. “You’ve got something. I want to know what it is.”

Now she looked positively gleeful. “A witch has to have her secrets, Malfoy. Maybe I’ve suddenly become in tune with my Inner Eye.”

There was a distant snort at the other end of the table, and Draco looked around Granger to see Sibyll Trelawney looking distinctly disgruntled.

“Are you choking Sibyll?” asked Granger in a saccharine voice. “I’d be happy to assist.”

Trelawney just shrunk down in her chair, and Draco struggled not to laugh.

“Fine,” he said. “But maybe you can use your Inner Eye to help the rest of us, yeah? Give us some tips about where to look.”

She cocked her head and studied him. “Alright then. I’ll check my Inner Eye before your rounds coming up. We’ll see if it works as well for you as for me.”

He narrowed his eyes at this, but didn't say anything as the post arrived with the usual collection of papers.

Four nights later, however, she approached him just as he was about to leave for rounds.

"My Inner Eye says you might find some wayward Slytherins in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, a couple of Hufflepuffs behind Greenhouse 2, and a Ravenclaw or three in the stacks of the library, between Aisles 272 and 273. Give or take."

He just stared at her.

"Evening Malfoy," she said with a smirk as she started to turn away, but then he snapped to attention.

"No Gryffindors, Granger?"

She stopped and turned back to him with that delightfully mischievous look. "Ah, you see, my Inner Eye seems to like Gryffindors for some reason. It doesn't want to give away their secrets, not even when the Gryffindors in question are... *towering* over the rest of the student body."

With this cryptic hint, Granger moved away, and Draco immediately set to work.

Figuring the Hufflepuffs were the least amorous of the bunch and therefore likely to finish first, he went to Greenhouse 2. There he found a fourth year and fifth year snogging like mad, though they were being oddly respectful with each other while they were doing it. Draco snorted. Typical.

"Twenty points from Hufflepuff," he said dully, as the students scampered away.

Next up, he debated between Ravenclaw and Slytherin and broke the tie based on proximity. He would pass the library first, so he headed back into the castle and made his way into the library, weaving through the stacks until he found Aisle 272. Sure enough, three Ravenclaws were huddled there, examining a book, and they all looked up in fright when they heard Draco approach.

"What are you lot doing?" he asked. It was unusual to catch students out of bed unless they were snogging or shagging. And the fact that they were so close to the Restricted Section made Draco pause.

"Nothing Professor," said one of the students quickly, attempting to hide the book.

"Give it here," said Draco, and eventually the students sighed and handed it over.

The Dark Mark

"What's this about then?" he asked as he felt blood start to pound in his ears.

"We just... well, we were just wondering about the ceremony for the Dark Mark and whether they're still visible with You-Know-Who gone and..."

Draco yanked up his sleeve and shoved his left forearm toward the students, who all recoiled.

“Does this answer it for you?”

The students nodded mutely.

“Good. Now get out of here, and don’t let me or anybody else catch you looking that up again. The ceremony was painful. It was vile. And there is absolutely no good reason for you to know anything about it, unless you are trying to perform it yourselves. I’ll be reporting this to Professor McGonagall, and if I hear even a peep about it again, I’ll be reporting it to the aurors too.”

The students were all looking at him wide-eyed. “But sir, we just wanted to know...” one started.

Draco cut him off. “I understand that Ravenclaws are curious and have a thirst for knowledge. But this is out of bounds. The Dark Mark is nothing but foul. Now I’ll be taking twenty points from each of you tonight, so that’s sixty points from Ravenclaw. Get out of here, before I make it a hundred per student.”

They scampered, and Draco was left feeling oddly drained as he pocketed the book, making a mental note to talk to Minerva about the types of books Hogwarts kept in the Restricted Section as soon as possible.

He shook himself off and made his way out of the library and toward Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. He heard some scuffling coming from inside, as he pushed the door open to find Astoria Greengrass and Terrance Hill in an unfortunate state of undress. He sighed. “Twenty points from Slytherin,” he said. “Now get dressed and go back to the common room.”

To his consternation, Astoria didn’t immediately comply, but peeled herself off of Hill and said in a simpering voice. “Oh... of course professor. But my shirt... you know, it’s close to you.”

She sauntered forward, and Draco averted his eyes as she closed in on him.

“I won’t tell you again. Get dressed and get back to the common room, or it will be fifty points from Slytherin.”

“Yes... Professor,” Astoria purred.

Draco just pinched the bridge of his nose and exited the bathroom, waiting to make sure they left too before he went in search of the Gryffindors. What had Granger said about them? *Towering* over the rest of the students.

Draco sighed, as he realized what she was implying.

Just then the door opened, and Astoria came waltzing out with an embarrassed-looking Hill following her. “Good night professor. Do let me know if I could... earn my points back by serving a detention instead. With you.”

Hill's jaw dropped, and Draco just closed his eyes. "No, Miss Greengrass. I'm afraid you will not be able to earn your points back. Now be off with you. Both of you."

They walked away, Terrance Hill looking mutinous and Astoria sending a flirty smile back his way. Draco just groaned and headed toward the Astronomy Tower.

As he approached he heard some suspicious grunting, and he mentally sighed to himself. Sure enough, he opened the door with a slam, and a Gryffindor seventh year boy jumped back and yanked his pants up, while the Gryffindor seventh-year girl he had just been shagging scrambled to pull her skirt down. Draco saw she was on the very edge of the parapet. It was a miracle her partner hadn't pushed her over the edge with his enthusiastic thrusts.

"Have you two lost your fucking minds?" he demanded. "Shagging on the edge of the goddamn Astronomy Tower? You do realize Dumbledore *died* here, don't you? He fell over the edge, nine fucking stories until he hit the ground at the bottom! At least he was already dead when it happened! How do you think it would feel if *that's* the way you went out of this world? You'd risk that for a shag? You two are mental. For fuck's sake, twenty points from Gryffindor for being out of bed, and another twenty points for being so unbelievably stupid I don't even have the words for it."

The Gryffindors' eyes were wide, and Draco had to admit he might have overdone it, but their recklessness had set him off. All he could see was Dumbledore's broken body arching over the edge as he fell down, down, down...

The students gulped and scurried off, as Draco pinched the bridge of his nose again.

Gryffindors.

Though Draco had only been on patrol for a half hour at this point, he felt like he had done enough for one evening. He made his way back to the staff common room and down the hallway toward the bedrooms. When he got to his door he hesitated and knocked on Granger's instead.

A moment later she opened it, and Draco's mouth went dry as he stared at her. She was dressed for bed and admittedly it wasn't as rique as that evening at her parents' house, but she was still showing far more skin than he typically saw during the day.

"You're back early. Rounds went well then, I take it?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

He shook himself out of it and nodded. "First we had the Hufflepuffs," he said, as he ticked them off with his hand. "Heavy kissing, moderate tongue, though otherwise entirely respectful, just as you would expect."

"Naturally," she said with some amusement.

"Next we had the Ravenclaws – they were looking up the damned Dark Mark because they are so insatiably curious they want to know everything about it. I'll be having words with

Minerva about this,” he said as he pulled out the book and showed it to her. Her eyes narrowed as she took it from him.

“It’s odd,” she said quietly. “It’s so obviously a variation on the protean charm I’m surprised they felt the need to look it up.”

This news was sufficiently distracting that Draco just stared at her.

“What?” she asked. “The Dark Mark gave me the idea for the D.A. galleons in fifth year. He pressed the Mark, and it called you. I carved the symbols into metal instead of skin, obviously, but the point remains. The Dark Mark used the protean charm.”

Draco nodded slowly, and now he had to know.

“Is that why the Mark doesn’t scare you then? Because you know how it was done?”

She shrugged. “It’s just magic like anything else, isn’t it? Granted, it’s dark. But it was Voldemort who made it dark, and he’s gone. Without him around, it’s really just a tattoo. Even the protean properties would no longer work without him, because I wager he was the source magic for it.”

Draco nodded again, nearly spellbound as he listened to her.

“That being said, I’m with you that this book probably doesn’t need to be quite so accessible to students. It should be behind extra enchantments in the Restricted Section so we can track who is reading about it. We can talk to Minerva about it.”

He nodded, and this snapped him out of it. “The Slytherins then... halfway to a shag of course, and Astoria Greengrass made quite a show of getting dressed afterwards.”

Her nose wrinkled at this. “She’s part of your fanclub isn’t she?”

“My what?” he asked in confusion.

She shook her head. “Nevermind. Go on. Did you find any Gryffindors?”

Now her eyes were twinkling with mirth, and Draco scowled at her. “I did. At the top of the Astronomy Tower, shagging on the damned parapet. It was bloody reckless.”

To his consternation a look of glee crossed her face.

“Oh Malfoy, tell me you didn’t dissuade them. A parapet shag was one of those things to aspire to in Gryffindor House a few years ago. I’m rather pleased to hear it hasn’t lost the appeal among the student body.”

“Granger, they could have fallen to their deaths.”

“Nothing a sticking charm can’t solve,” she said airily. “Besides...”

Now she leaned toward him conspiratorially, and Draco couldn't help but lean in too. He felt himself nearly getting lost in her golden eyes.

"Don't tell me you've never thought about it," she said with a smirk.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, as she just gave him a satisfied look as she leaned back.

"Glad to hear your rounds went so well, Malfoy. I'll check my Inner Eye next week too, shall I?"

Draco just nodded as she shut the door in his face.

Fuck me, I want her. Dating issues be damned.

Chapter 8: Referee

Hermione

During the first two months of teaching, Hermione learned that Draco Malfoy was a creature of habit. Just like her, he took *The Daily Prophet* in the mornings, though for some strange reason he seemed to read it much more slowly than she did. Despite the fact that he always opened it in the mornings, she noticed he usually read it at night too, in the staff common room near the fire.

He always drank chai tea, never coffee, and he turned in at precisely the same time each evening, except for Tuesdays, which was his night for patrol. On Sunday afternoons he would leave the castle for about an hour for some undisclosed location, though this did not seem to concern Minerva.

“I’m aware of it. Don’t worry about it,” she said when Hermione raised it, after seeing him disappear into his fireplace on the Marauder’s Map for three weeks in a row. Hermione huffed, but dropped it. After all, he was entitled to his privacy, and if Minerva knew what he was doing then presumably there was nothing suspicious going on.

And then Saturday nights and Wednesday nights he would pretend to go to bed at the same time as the other staff and then sneak out much later to visit the Room of Requirement.

Though Sundays had been Hermione’s favorite day of the week for a couple of years, it wasn’t long before Sunday was eclipsed by Saturday and Wednesday. After that first night she listened to him play, Hermione watched the map carefully and followed him again and again and again.

She learned he would warm up for the first ten minutes, and that gave her enough time to slip in unnoticed in her cat form, listening in the shadows as he played. He never noticed the little black cat in the corner, seemingly totally absorbed by the music and piano.

He seemed to favor concertos, especially by Russian composers. She heard more Rachmaninov of course, but also Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich, though Beethoven and Schumann were liberally peppered in too. Night after night she listened to him practice and then play, and she was absolutely spellbound by his skill. And yet, to her knowledge, she was the only person who knew this about him. He had never mentioned it to her, and the rest of the staff seemed none the wiser that Draco Malfoy was sneaking around the castle twice a week as a closet concert pianist.

For her part, Hermione wasn’t sure why she kept following him into the Room of Requirement. She thought it might have something to do with the emotion he conveyed in his music. She got the impression that this was how Malfoy processed the war and everything he had been asked to do and see. The pain she sensed in it was almost cathartic, and she felt some of the poison from the war leech out of her too whenever she listened to

him play. Or maybe she simply listened because she was intensely curious about Malfoy and the things that drove him to defy everyone's expectations and end up at Hogwarts in the first place.

Hermione and Malfoy were warming to each other, of that she was certain. But he was still intensely private, and she had so many questions swirling in her head about him that she couldn't help but watch and listen in his presence. She had always loved puzzles, and he was a puzzle she still had not solved.

After learning Malfoy's schedule, Hermione had started watching the map to see if anybody else had discovered the piano Malfoy still called "Hermione," "pretty girl," or "beautiful," depending upon his mood. But after careful observation, she was almost certain that nobody but Malfoy had discovered it, and he was the only one going into the room to play. This gave Hermione an idea.

The room, of course, could provide nearly anything the seeker requested, and that included sheet music. Malfoy had evidently requested a stack of music when he first started, and this stack stayed in the room from session to session as he worked through it.

Secure in the knowledge that nobody but the two of them knew about this version of the room, Hermione slipped in early one Saturday morning and decided to change things up. She asked the room to banish the classical music, which it easily did, and then she replaced it with something else she was dying to hear him play. Then she snuck back in early that evening and waited in the shadows to see what he would do.

Malfoy arrived at the same time as always, and Hermione watched as he slipped off his robes and rolled up his sleeves before sitting down to warm up. This he did by rote, playing the same scales and arpeggios and chords as usual, until after ten minutes or so he walked over to the stack of sheet music where he came to an abrupt halt as he stared at it.

He spun around, and Hermione instinctively slunk further into the shadows, but thankfully he didn't see her. Instead, he turned back slowly and picked up the piece of music on top before making his way over to the piano where he sat down and brushed the keys lightly.

"Has somebody else found you then, pretty girl?" he asked out loud. "I had thought you were all mine, but I suppose it's possible..." He trailed off as he looked back over at the stack of music that was different from anything he had ever played in the Room before.

Finally he shrugged. "No matter. Whoever it is, I'd wager they don't touch you like I do."

Hermione shivered at these words as she watched him raise his fingers and the first notes of *Summertime* emerged, more beautiful and clear than she had ever heard before. He played it once all the way through, and she could see that he didn't recognize it, but he was intrigued by it.

And then he flipped back to the beginning and started over, as he began to sing.

"Summertime... and the livin' is easy..."

If cats could gasp, Hermione would have. *Bloody hell, he can sing.*

She knew Malfoy's voice was smooth when he spoke. He had the refined accent of the peerage, and she would not have been surprised to learn that he had elocution lessons as a child. But his singing voice was something else entirely. He was a rich baritone, perfectly in tune, with just enough vibrato to tell her he had probably had voice lessons at some point too. She was absolutely transfixed.

"Oh your daddy's rich... and your mama's good lookin'..."

Hermione felt her insides melting. It was a very odd sensation as a cat, but she knew if she had been herself she would be feeling this all the way into her knickers. The music was sensual and compelling in a way that even the classical pieces he had played before were not.

All too soon the song was over, and then he picked up the next piece.

"Somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly..."

This time the song was so achingly beautiful she knew her human form would have teared up. As it was, Hermione's little cat heart swelled as she listened to the familiar song, which had always been one of her favorites as a young child. Again, he didn't seem to recognize it, but he played it perfectly, and the sound of his voice was almost a caress as the words tumbled out in time with the music.

As she listened to Draco Malfoy play through a stack of Hermione's muggle favorites, she was finally forced to conclude that she was attracted to him, *really* attracted to him, and in more ways than just a quick romp between the sheets. Yes, she knew a relationship with him would probably be futile, and he wasn't likely to be interested in her in that way in the first place... But she couldn't help but want it anyway. He had layers to him that she was dying to peel back. He continued to surprise her, and she found herself drawn to him, especially when he was like this: alone with just his voice and the piano named Hermione.

Finally, at long last, Malfoy was finished, and he rose with one last stroke of the keys.

"Goodnight beautiful. I suppose we'll see what your other player leaves me next week, won't we?"

Hermione disappeared into the shadows as he exited the room and then she counted to ten before slipping out herself. Once back in her own room she undressed and slipped under the covers and then, for the first time since that night at her parents' home, she started to touch herself as she remembered his fingers and his voice.

This time there was no hesitation, no guilt, no rationalizing her behavior with herself as she tugged and pulled and pressed and plunged until she sent herself careening over the edge with a gasp.

She was attracted to Draco Malfoy. She wanted to shag Draco Malfoy. She actually fancied Draco Malfoy.

Sod it all.

The first Saturday in November heralded the beginning of quidditch season. The first match was Slytherin versus Ravenclaw, and Hermione was amused to find that the war had done nothing to dampen the enthusiasm from the students. While not as hostile as Slytherin vs. Gryffindor, the professors still had their work cut out for them as the weekend approached.

Malfoy was in his element, his classic Slytherin snark on full display.

“Well it’s not like there’s any secret about who will *win*,” said Aurora Sinistra loudly one evening, as she eyed Malfoy with some hostility. She herself was a former Ravenclaw, and Hermione was surprised to learn just how much she cared about it.

“Yes, I plan to throw the game in favor of Slytherin if they can’t manage on their own,” said Malfoy dryly as he surveyed his copy of *The Daily Prophet*. “You heard it here first.”

Hermione couldn’t help but chuckle at this from her table with the jigsaw puzzle. She was wary this time because twice more she had opened used boxes only to discover pieces missing at the end. The new boxes contained all the pieces of course, but Hermione only had a few puzzles that were new at the moment and had burned through most of them. Her streak of bad luck with the used puzzles had been frustrating.

She caught Malfoy’s eye, and he smirked.

“It can’t possibly be as bad as the time Snape refereed,” she said.

Malfoy raised an amused eyebrow. “I’m surprised you remember that Granger.”

She just gave him a long-suffering look. “Yes, well Harry is *still* talking about it, so I would say I remember it well enough.”

He gave a wolfish grin at this. “That gives me something to aspire to then. I’ll channel my inner Snape.”

“I might have to set you on fire then,” she quipped. “I did that to him during Harry’s very first match you know.”

There was a ringing silence at this, as everyone turned to stare at her. Hermione felt herself blush.

“I thought he was trying to curse Harry, that’s all,” she muttered.

Malfoy waited until the common room had returned to normal before saying quietly, “Granger, you’re welcome to set me on fire any time you want.”

Now Hermione felt herself go scarlet as she turned back to her puzzle.

She couldn't help but notice Malfoy had a small smile on his face as he continued to read.

Hermione had just gotten reabsorbed into her puzzle when she sensed a form hovering over her. She looked up to find Neville watching her nervously.

"Oh hey Nev," she said, as she turned back to her puzzle. The piece she was holding *should* go there. But it didn't quite fit...

"Hey Hermione I was wondering if maybe you wanted to go get drinks at the Three Broomsticks on Saturday? We don't have any patrols with the match."

She looked up to stare at him. Out of the corner of her eye, she sensed Malfoy had gone very still behind his paper.

"But what about the match?" she asked in confusion.

Neville shrugged. "What about it? It's just quidditch. Gryffindor isn't even playing."

"No..." said Hermione slowly. "But the Ravensclaws and Slytherins are my students too."

"I thought you didn't care about quidditch," said Neville in confusion.

"I wouldn't say that," chimed in Malfoy's voice. "She only dates quidditch players, right Granger?"

Hermione was suddenly struck by a memory of a very similar conversation she had once had with Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil.

"Erm..." she started. "I don't date much but..."

"But they've all been quidditch players," said Malfoy confidently. "Which says you must care about quidditch at least a little bit."

"Oh..." said Neville, and he sounded so forlorn that Hermione mentally winced.

"Maybe later Neville," she said quickly. "I'm looking forward to the match on Saturday."

"Right," said Neville as he shuffled off toward the rooms.

Hermione rounded on Malfoy.

"Was that really necessary?" she hissed under her breath.

He put down his paper and looked at her squarely. "Don't tell me you would rather get drinks with Longbottom than go to the match."

"No, of course not, but..."

"So you let him down easy."

“But now he’s going to think he’s not good enough to date me since he doesn’t play quidditch.”

“Do you *want* to date him?”

“Well no, but...”

“So like I said, you’re letting him down easy. He will disqualify himself this way.”

“But don’t you think...”

“I think it’s kinder for him to get a hint and get over you himself than for you to tell him ‘hey Longbottom, I’m not interested in letting you into my knickers.’”

Hermione’s jaw dropped, and he smirked.

“Neville’s not like that!”

Now he gave her an incredulous look. “Granger, I can assure you, every straight wizard in this castle aged fourteen and up wants to get into your knickers.”

Her eyes widened, but he didn’t blush at the thing he had just implied. He just stared her down.

“But... but...” she said weakly. “Using quidditch...”

“First of all,” said Malfoy reasonably, “it doesn’t matter what criteria we use as long as it’s something that disqualifies Longbottom. Second, you *do* have a thing for quidditch players. Admit it.”

“I...” she wrinkled her nose as she sighed. “Alright *fine* I might have a thing for quidditch players. Don’t ask me to explain it though because I don’t fully understand it myself.”

He got a triumphant look on his face. “Ha! I knew it. It’s the athleticism, the speed, the danger.”

“I was going to say it’s probably the leathers, actually.”

Malfoy looked delighted. “Never say so Granger.”

She shrugged. “I have eyes. I’m not saying that’s enough to make me want to date a bloke, but it certainly doesn’t hurt.”

He looked supremely satisfied at this. “I don’t suppose you can imagine Longbottom in leathers.”

“I... no,” she sighed with a small smile. “I can’t.”

He was looking so superior now that she had to mess with him just a little bit.

“Then again, there are other characteristics I like that seem rather thin on the ground. Sometimes you have to compromise, right?”

His eyes narrowed. “Like what?”

Hermione wondered if she dared say it, but finally decided to see if it would push him to tell her the truth.

“After Ron you know I went on a few dates with muggle blokes. Nothing serious, but I rather liked not being followed by the media.”

He inclined his head.

“And now that I’m thinking about it, they all had something in common. Obviously not quidditch though, seeing as how muggles don’t play it.”

“What was it then?” he asked, and she could tell he was intensely curious, though he was trying to be casual about it.

“They were all musicians. So maybe I have a thing for musicians too.”

She was watching him carefully, and she saw his eyes widen just a fraction of an inch.

Will you tell me now then?

“Quidditch players and musicians. That’s an unusual combination, Granger.”

Alright then, not tonight.

“Yes, which goes to show... sometimes we have to compromise, don’t we? Perhaps I should give Neville a chance.”

His mouth thinned. “You shouldn’t compromise on what you want.”

She shrugged. “Well if you see any quidditch playing musicians hanging around the castle or even Hogsmeade, send them my way yeah? Merlin knows I’d be open to it.”

He was rooted to the spot, and she allowed herself the enjoyment of getting the final word as she turned her back on him and headed toward her own room.

Hermione’s success at one-upping Malfoy in the staff common room was short lived because a few days later she found herself in the stands, waiting for the quidditch game to start.

She had been dithering about what to wear to this one — as a student she obviously would have supported Ravenclaw, but as a teacher she felt it was rather unfair to blatantly support

one team over the other, at least until she was a Head of House. But then Malfoy, of all people, had solved the problem for her when he materialized with a green and blue striped scarf.

“I had them made for all the match-ups,” he said. “Minerva didn’t tell me she would let me referee until right before term started. I won’t need them.”

That was how Hermione found herself wrapped up in a luxuriously soft cashmere scarf that supported both teams and even smelled like Malfoy. This she didn’t understand because she had never seen him wear it before, but she wasn’t complaining. The musky scent of him with the faintness of his aftershave and even that hint of firewhiskey and tea that always seemed to linger around him was making her head swim.

And then Malfoy himself strode onto the pitch in his cycling uniform, custom quidditch leathers, and gleaming broom. He was carrying a crate with the balls under one arm, and he dropped it into the middle of the pitch before calling both captains over to talk to them.

Bloody hell he looks good enough to eat.

Hermione could see she wasn’t the only one who thought this. Once again, she noted several of the older female staff members watching him attentively, and nearly half the seventh year girls were swooning. There were even a few “We love Professor Malfoy” signs in the stands.

Honestly.

As he spoke to them, Hermione could see the Ravenclaw team looked sullen and the Slytherin team delighted, but Hermione couldn’t help but feel both teams would be in for a surprise with Malfoy. After all, he had done nothing but surprise her this entire term. Sure enough, not ten seconds after he blew the whistle for the game to begin, he called a foul on Slytherin that made the green-clad supporters groan and the staff members near her gape.

“I didn’t think he would be unbiased,” muttered Minerva, “but he was really the only choice after Madam Hooch’s accident.”

“I did,” said Hermione simply.

And he was.

Over and over again, he called fouls on both teams until they were forced to play a fair game. And unlike Madam Hooch, who had always just circled above the players, Malfoy was in the middle of them. Hermione was nearly mesmerized as she watched. She knew he was flying a top-of-the-line broom. He had confessed to her that when Minerva assigned the flying instructor position to him, he had splurged on the latest model Firebolt to replace his old Nimbus 2001 from school. It put Harry’s Firebolt, which Hermione had always thought was a very sleek broom indeed, to shame. Malfoy was nothing more than a blur, and he was able to stay neck in neck with the players to ensure their game was clean. When the seekers finally saw the snitch, Malfoy was on the other side of the pitch, but he raced them to it and corkscrewed straight down toward the ground to watch their hands, only pulling out of his dive at the last possible second. One of the seekers didn’t pull out in time and plowed into

the ground, making Hermione squeal with anxiety as Madam Pomfrey raced out onto the pitch.

“Concussed, poor thing,” she tsked. “But no matter, I’ll get him straightened up in a trice.”

For his part, Malfoy landed smoothly, before calling the game for Ravenclaw, who had won by fifty points. The Slytherins looked crestfallen, but Malfoy was evidently unconcerned as he called the final score and told the teams to clean up before flying up to the staff box.

“Excellent game, Draco,” said Minerva with approval. “Really, I must say I was very impressed.”

He gave her a genuine smile. “You know I love quidditch.”

“I do,” she said enthusiastically. “And I do believe this appointment will work.”

He inclined his head before turning to Hermione. “Granger,” he said, and his eyes warmed as he surveyed the scarf.

“Malfoy,” she said. “You... fly well.”

He shrugged. “I have a good broom. I’ll see you around in the common room, yeah? I understand that the professors get their own mini celebration after each game.”

Hermione just nodded, at a loss for words as she stared at him. He shot her one last smile before mounting his broom and taking off again, steering clear of the disappointed group of girls clamoring for his attention in the stands.

Minerva gave her a knowing look.

“What?” asked Hermione, reddening under her mentor’s gaze.

“He likes you,” was all she said.

Hermione shrugged uncomfortably. “We’ve developed a... bit of a friendship, that’s all.”

“He still calls you by your last name. And you call him by his.”

“Old habits,” said Hermione automatically.

Minerva’s eyes twinkled. “Well I can’t say I’m *terribly* surprised. He was rather fixated on you, Harry, and Ron when you were all at school together.”

Hermione gave Minerva an appalled look. “He wasn’t *fixated* on me.”

Minerva shrugged. “Call it what you will, but I’ve watched students do this for years, my dear. I’ll admit that most of his attention was taken by Harry and Ron, but I always wondered if his obvious jealousy of them was driven by something other than Harry’s fame. He was always much crueller to Ron than he was to Harry, and I could only think of one explanation for it.”

“Oh surely not...” started Hermione, and Minerva just smiled.

“Time will tell, my dear. I must say though, I much prefer the new and improved version of Draco Malfoy, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Hermione softly as she stared after the speck in the distance that was Malfoy.

“Head on to the party then dear. Draco is certainly correct that the teachers use quidditch games as an excuse to let our hair down.”

Hermione smiled at this as she snuggled into the scarf and made her way off the pitch.

Draco

Draco stripped down and showered quickly, very pleased with how the match had gone. He loved flying, and his broom was superb. It was almost more fun refereeing than playing because he didn’t really care who won the match. He could fly with the chasers, the beaters, and the seekers, all at the same time.

He had forced a very clean game both to impress Minerva so she would allow him to keep his position, and also as a way of drawing Granger’s attention. He had glanced at the stands a few times during the course of the game and found her eyes tracking him each time. It was enough to give his flying a bit of a flourish as he showed off in front of her.

Having decided he really wanted her, he still wasn’t sure what to *do* about it. The first step, of course, was dissuading Longbottom, and this he had done with ease. He had watched Granger closely out of the corner of his eye, and he was well-satisfied that she truly wasn’t interested in Longbottom. So that problem solved, he now turned to the much bigger problem of how to draw her interest to him.

It was true she flirted with him now and then, but it was never anything too serious. She didn’t give him the same, very obvious, signals he was accustomed to receiving from witches who wanted a romp. And of course, the fact that Granger *didn’t* want a romp made Draco feel like he was a bit adrift. He sensed he would need to draw her interest slowly and convince her to fall for him before he made a move.

Her confession that she liked quidditch players *and* musicians had made Draco nearly jump for joy until he remembered he couldn’t tell her about his musical abilities without showing his hand. So he kept it to himself and decided to bide his time.

He also knew he needed to apologize to her at some point for the Manor and his behavior toward her at Hogwarts. This he also wasn’t sure how to do, but he tried to trust that the opportunity would present itself at some point. And in the meantime, he would take the opportunities she *did* give him to draw her attention to him.

The scarf, for instance, had been one of his better ideas. When Granger started worrying over which team to support Draco immediately thought of the scarf. But he waited a couple days to give it to her and slept with it while he waited. He didn't know exactly what he smelled like of course, but witches in the past had told him he smelled good. And he knew from his potions training that scent memories were powerful. *Very* powerful. So he made sure the scarf smelled like him and then cast a stasis charm on it before he gave it to her so she would be thinking about him every time she got a whiff. The sight of her buried in it had been the cherry on top.

Yes, Draco was a man of subtlety, and he knew he would have to draw on this so Granger would look past all the obvious red flags with their relationship and fall for him anyway.

Draco stared at himself in the mirror as he considered whether to dry his hair, and then he smirked as he decided to keep it damp. Maybe it would make Granger think of him in the shower. He pushed the fringe out of his face and with one final look he left his room and headed to the staff common room.

He scanned the room and immediately found Granger chatting with John Dawlish, the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. Draco stilled for a moment before taking a deep breath and walking over.

He and Dawlish had not spoken a single time since Draco joined the staff. As a former auror, Dawlish had been rather outspoken against Draco, and Minerva had advised him to keep his distance. But the witch Draco wanted was talking to him, so he gritted his teeth and headed over.

"Malfoy!" said Granger brightly as she turned to look at him. Draco noticed she visibly swallowed when she saw his hair, and he couldn't help but smirk.

"Granger," he said. "Fancy a drink then?"

"Oh," she said as though she hadn't thought of it.

"I'm sure she'll like a butterbeer," said Dawlish, with dismissive gesture toward Draco.

Draco ignored him and watched Granger.

"Erm..." she said awkwardly.

"Firewhiskey?" he asked. "They put out Ogden's finest."

"Yes, please, that would be lovely," she said.

Dawlish grimaced as Draco left for a moment to fetch her drink, and he sidled up to her.

"So Malfoy," she said, "John was just telling me that he wants to start the dueling club again in the next term. I told him I would be happy to assist with a demonstration."

"Hermione, there's no need, really," said Dawlish arrogantly. "I'm an auror, you know. I'm more than capable of demonstrating for the students."

“Of course,” said Granger a bit coldly. “But it seems to me like it might be helpful to show them a real duel. I’m a rather good duelist. And I did develop some new techniques the aurors have started to incorporate into their own training.”

“Yes, I’ve read about it,” said Dawlish, and it could not have been clearer that he thought Granger’s methods were a waste of time.

“They seem to work rather well,” said Draco casually. “I was gratified to see the aftermath during a very interesting detention at the beginning of term.”

Granger beamed at him, and Dawlish looked like he was struggling not to roll his eyes.

“Humor me, John,” said Granger with a sweetness in her voice that Draco knew meant trouble.

“Very well,” said Dawlish magnanimously. “I’m sure it will be very entertaining for the students to see their Transfiguration Professor duel an auror.”

Draco thought that if looks could kill, Dawlish would be dead now. But he didn’t seem to notice.

“Now Hermione,” he said pompously, “tell me about your holiday plans.”

Despite himself, Draco stilled to listen.

“I’ll be staying at the castle until Christmas Eve. Then I’ll be headed to Harry’s for a week or so until the new year. We always do Christmas with the Weasleys.”

Dawlish puffed up. “Well, you know the Saturday before Christmas is the big Ministry holiday gala. I was wondering if you would like to attend with me?”

What the bloody hell? Draco wondered. Granger’s face seemed to reflect his amazement.

“Oh erm, that’s very kind of you to ask, but I try to avoid that sort of thing. The media exposure just isn’t worth it.”

Draco struggled not to smile with glee at the look of shock on Dawlish’s face.

“Malfoy,” said Granger suddenly, and to his surprise she grabbed his arm. “I just remembered, we were supposed to discuss that detention with the seventh year Slytherins.”

“Of course,” he said smoothly, and he let her pull him away, as Dawlish gave him a dark look.

She wove in and out of the crowd and to his surprise finally led him down the corridor to their rooms.

“Granger, people are going to think...” he started.

“Sod them. I don’t care. Do you?”

“Not at all,” he said, rather surprised, but very pleased by this turn of events.

She nodded at this and then opened her door and practically shoved him inside.

She slammed the door, cast a silencing charm and drained her drink before slamming it down on her desk. Draco was watching her cautiously but he didn’t take his eyes off of her as he lowered himself onto a chair in her small sitting area.

She started to pace. “That complete *ARSE!*” she shouted. “I mean, what the hell was that? Tell me, Malfoy, please. What in the actual hell was that?!”

Draco started to relax, ready to watch the show.

“I told you that plenty of wizards want to get into your knickers Granger.”

She cast him a disgusted look. “As if I would *EVER*... Ugh! He’s old enough to be my father!”

“He’s only about fifteen years older than us,” Draco pointed out reasonably.

“But still! That’s just... no! And coming off of *insulting me*? I mean, can you *believe* that? He wasn’t even in the Order!”

This news made Draco blink. “Wait, really?”

“Yes really,” she snorted. “He was with the Ministry. He spent most of the war confunded. I suppose that’s the reason he doesn’t remember the fact that *I* saved his sodding life during the Battle of Hogwarts! Twice!”

She was in a towering rage, and Draco just sat back to admire her.

She’s magnificent, he thought a bit dreamily.

“That great giant *PRAT* acts like I’m some sort of shrinking violet... as though Shacklebolt *himself* didn’t demand that defensive transfiguration be incorporated into auror training! I mean, I’m practically trained as an auror myself! Tonks trained me before she died, and I was Harry’s dueling partner for the last two years!”

She was still pacing, but this news made Draco sit up.

“You were Potter’s dueling partner? What about Weasley?”

She shot him a look. “Ron spent a year with the aurors right after the war to round up former Death Eaters. You know Shacklebolt let anybody who fought for the light do it since the Ministry was in a shambles. So the boys did that while I went back to Hogwarts for eighth year. But after that first year... Shacklebolt formalized the auror department again, though he condensed training to two years instead of three for anybody who had fought in the war. Ron didn’t want to do additional training so he moved to the joke shop to be with George. But Harry stayed with the aurors to be trained. I lived with him for those two years while I was doing my mastery, and we used to duel in the Grimmauld Place ballroom at night to practice.

That's how I landed on defensive transfiguration in the first place. I tried conjuring barriers one night, and I absolutely trounced him. Harry's the best at defensive transfiguration in the auror department because we really developed it together. I taught him advanced transfiguration techniques, and he taught me what he learned in auror training, and we blended the two. So yes, I'm effectively auror qualified, and I have a lot more practical experience than bleeding *Dawlish*."

She sneered as she said his name, as though it was something dirty on the bottom of her shoe.

Draco just stared at her, both surprised and yet not that she was even better at defense than he realized. She probably could have taught the subject herself.

"Well then, you should show up to the first meeting of the dueling club and kick Dawlish's arse. Maybe it will take him down a peg or two."

She gave him a small smile at this. "That's certainly my plan."

Then her smile dropped again, and she frowned. "But *honestly*, asking me out after all that? And now I can't even go to the gala because I told him I wouldn't be there."

She stopped pacing now and flung herself into the chair opposite him with a brooding look on her face.

Draco furrowed his brow. "You were planning on going anyway?"

She shrugged. "Yeah. Shackbolt invites me every year, and I was definitely going to go this year since I haven't seen Harry or Ron in ages, and they always attend." She snorted. "I even ordered a dress for it already. But sodding *Dawlish* had to go and ruin it of course."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You ordered a dress already?"

She nodded. "Yes, I always go muggle. It takes longer than something from a wizarding shop, but there are a lot more options that way." She sighed. "I found a really good one this year too, and I was quite looking forward to wearing it. Stupid *Dawlish*."

Draco couldn't help it, he grinned at this.

"What?" she asked in a disgruntled voice.

"You're saying his name like it's some sort of curse word, that's all."

She gave him a reluctant smile at this. "Yes, well, he's ruined all my plans."

Draco studied her for a moment. "Why did you tell him the media attention isn't worth it? If you were planning on going anyway?"

She shrugged. "First thing I thought of. And in his case, it's true. Anytime I show up with a wizard the media has a field day with it."

Draco contemplated this. He knew this was true, and he was sure it would be a major hurdle in *his* pursuit of her.

No time like the present to get to the bottom of it.

“So is that why you don’t really date then? You don’t like the media attention?”

She sighed. “Partially. It’s not like I’m unwilling to put up with it if I actually like the bloke. It happens whether I’m really with a wizard or not, and I’ve never let the media dictate my public relationship with Harry or any of the Weasley brothers. But yeah, it makes dating challenging. And I’m never certain if the wizard is asking me out because he actually likes me or if it’s because he wants a piece of my fame. I’d wager that’s the real reason why Dawlish wanted to go to the Ministry party with me. He just wants to make it into *The Prophet*.”

She rolled her eyes as she said this, and Draco inclined his head in acknowledgment. “That’s fair. I have a similar problem. Nearly all the witches who act like they want to be with me are really after the money and the title.”

She gave him a sympathetic smile. “Yes, precisely. And you generate a good bit of press yourself. You make the society pages every time you step out with a new witch.”

He grimaced. “True. Though it’s always breathless speculation about the next Lady Malfoy.”

She nodded. “Quite. But in my case I get labeled as a slag when I’m seen with Harry one weekend and Ron the next. Nevermind the fact that we’ve all been best friends since our first year at Hogwarts, and Harry and I have never had even the slightest hint of romantic interest in each other. So being seen with a new wizard too... well, I’m very aware of what the media will say about it, so I don’t do it lightly. And I’m certainly not willing to put up with it for somebody like *Dawlish*.”

She sneered again as she said his name, and Draco tried not to laugh.

“But you *are* willing to put up with it if you like the bloke enough.”

She nodded. “Yes,” she said simply.

Draco sat back.

That will give me a clue, then, he thought. If she’s willing to be seen publicly with me.

“Good,” he said with some satisfaction. A plan had started to emerge in his mind but it would take a little time.

More time for me to work on her, he thought.

“Thanks Malfoy,” she said suddenly. “For letting me vent.”

“You can vent about that bastard anytime you want love,” he said, as he rose.

The term of endearment just slipped out unconsciously. Draco forced himself not to wince as he said it, but to his surprise Granger didn't seem to mind and started to blush prettily.

Maybe not the worst slip up then, he thought as he eyed her reaction to it.

She started to unwrap the scarf she was still wearing, but he reached out a hand to stop her.

"Don't," he said. "Keep it."

"Oh I couldn't possibly..." she started.

He raised an eyebrow, and she quieted. "If you ever want to give it back, make sure Dawlish is watching while you do it. But I think you should keep it and tie him up with it after you kick his arse in that duel."

To his delight her face broke out into a broad smile at this.

"Cheers, Malfoy," she said, as she pulled it closer around her.

"Good. Back to the party then?"

She nodded. "You go. I'll come along in a bit."

He gave her a swift look as he headed toward the door. Then he gave her a cheeky smile. "Don't wait too long. You wouldn't want to leave Dawlish hanging."

She just rolled her eyes at him, but smiled anyway as he slipped out.

First, the party. Then I need to make nice with Narcissa.

Chapter 9: Dreams

Chapter Notes

TW: Discussion of addiction

Hermione

The weeks following the first quidditch match of the season were both wonderful and incredibly frustrating.

On the one hand, something had turned with Malfoy, in a very good way. Hermione couldn't put her finger on *what* had changed, but he seemed to be everywhere she was. He engaged her in conversation more often. He made her coffee when he got to the table for breakfast first. He was flirtatious and called her 'love' at least once a day. Hermione wanted to squeal into her pillow like a preteen whenever she thought about it.

On the other hand, there was John Dawlish and, to a lesser degree, Neville. Dawlish was just as annoying as ever. Having recovered from the initial shock of rejection, he proceeded to ask her out *again*, this time for drinks at the Three Broomsticks. This time Neville had overheard, and the look of dismay on his face was almost enough to break Hermione's heart. She turned Dawlish down again, but he was undeterred and continued to ask her out. She eventually resigned herself to Dawlish's persistence and Neville's quiet moping. She wasn't sure what she could do to fix either one, short of saying yes.

And so Hermione found herself suspended between three wizards, in a turn of events she never could have predicted at the beginning of the year. The issue, of course, was she only wanted one of them. And as she got closer to Malfoy she started to think that he probably wanted her too, but unlike the others he hadn't made a move yet. She resolved to be patient and let him work through whatever it was that was holding him back from her. She knew as well as anybody the major hurdles they would face if they ever started something for real. She only hoped she would be enough for him, and while she waited for him to sort his feelings about it she was determined to enjoy every moment in case it all came to a screeching halt.

She just hoped she would be able to kiss him first before it did.

"Granger," said Malfoy, as he collapsed into the seat next to her at lunch one day near the end of term.

“Rough morning?” she asked curiously. He looked positively agitated. It was out of character for him.

“Bloody seventh year Slytherins. Astoria Greengrass intentionally failed to turn in her homework for the third week in a row so Slughorn gave her detention tonight.”

“So?” asked Hermione.

“So he assigned it to me to supervise. Fuck it all, I’m going to get fired.”

Hermione was amused despite herself. Astoria Greengrass had been throwing herself at Malfoy all term, and while Hermione found it incredibly annoying, Malfoy had been very clear he had no interest. Astoria may be a pureblood, but she wasn’t a threat.

“She’s not going to do anything,” said Hermione.

He gave her an incredulous look. “Are you kidding me? Of *course* she’s going to do something. She’s probably going to start stripping as soon as I get there. Goddammit.”

Hermione snickered, and he just cast her a baleful look. Finally Hermione decided to take pity on him.

“Fine, if you’re that worried about it I’ll cover for you.”

His face transformed into something like wonder as he looked at her. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“You would do that for me? Really?” he asked.

“Sure,” Hermione chuckled. “I can’t have you getting fired. We’ll call it your Christmas gift. I have no idea what to get the wizard who can buy anything for himself. So here you go. Happy Christmas Malfoy.”

The look of relief on Malfoy’s face was nearly priceless.

“Granger,” he said seriously, “this is probably the best gift anybody has given to me in the last decade.”

Hermione just chuckled again. “Then you’re easier to please than I thought.”

“You could never displease me, love,” he said.

Hermione felt herself blush as she looked down at her plate. “Yes... well, it solves a problem for me too, doesn’t it? No need to set foot in that bloody quidditch supply store in Hogsmeade.”

Hermione’s *actual* idea had been sheet music. But he still hadn’t confessed his talent to her, and she didn’t know how to give him something like that without admitting that she had been spying on him in the Room of Requirement for most of term. A night with Astoria Greengrass was a small price to pay to push that conversation to a later date.

He gave her a small smile. "I already own almost everything they sell."

She snorted. "Figures."

"But seriously," and now he looked at her earnestly. "Thank you. Thank you so damn much."

Hermione warmed at this. "No problem, Malfoy."

At eight that evening Hermione found herself making her way toward the dungeons, mentally steeling herself for the next couple of hours with Astoria Greengrass. Astoria had not hidden the fact that she disliked Hermione, and in Hermione's opinion the feeling was mutual. Still, Hermione had promised, so here she was.

She swept into the dungeons and found Astoria already there, her skirt hiked up and the top two buttons of her blouse undone. It was all Hermione could do not to roll her eyes.

"Good evening Miss Greengrass. Professor Slughorn has informed me that you are to catalog the potions ingredient stores for him. Off you go."

Astoria just blinked at her.

"Where's Draco?"

Hermione arched one eyebrow. "*Professor Malfoy* asked me to fill in for him. You won't be seeing him tonight. Now get to it. The faster you finish, the faster we can both get out of here."

Astoria huffed and flounced into the potions storeroom while Hermione dropped a stack of homework onto the desk to grade. She buried herself in her work as she listened to the sounds of Astoria in the room next to her, relieved that she didn't have to oversee her directly. After a couple hours Astoria emerged, red-faced and looking distinctly worse for the wear as she stalked over to Hermione and dropped a stack of parchment on the desk.

"Here," she said curtly.

Hermione picked it up and glanced through it before nodding and saying, "Very well, you're dismissed."

Astoria sneered at her and turned to leave, but as she got to the door she looked back at Hermione and said, "I know you're famous, *Professor*, but Draco would never touch a mudblood like you. You're making a fool of yourself by even trying."

Hermione went cold, but forced her face to stay impassive. "Twenty points from Slytherin."

Astoria rolled her eyes at this. “As though I care about points. I’ll be out of here in a few months, and then Draco will finally be able to date me. Dear Narcissa is in favor of it, did you know?”

Don’t rise, don’t rise, don’t rise.

“I rather think that if Draco Malfoy was going to date a Greengrass it would have been your sister Daphne. After all, she’s the same age as him and much prettier than you.”

Shit.

Astoria’s face contorted with rage. “Why you *BITCH!*” she screeched, as she drew her wand. Automatically Hermione rose and pulled her wand too.

“*Cruci—*” started Astoria, but Hermione had already reacted, and with a couple flicks of her wand, Astoria was silenced and thrown into a nearby chair, wandless.

“Now...” said Hermione quietly, as she stalked toward Astoria. “You may have forgotten, Miss Greengrass, but I helped bring down Voldemort. And the last person who successfully cruciated me was Bellatrix Lestrange, who only managed it once I was wandless and bound. That particular event occurred at Malfoy Manor, where *dear Narcissa* watched. And you should know that despite her cowardice that day, *dear Narcissa* wrote to me to apologize after the war. So I suggest you not test me, because you will not win. I would be more than happy to inform Professor McGonagall that you attempted an unforgivable curse against me. She would expel you in an instant. I would also love nothing more than to write to Harry Potter and tell him that you tried to cruciate his best friend. Or I could write to the Minister of Magic to say the same thing. Either one of them would be happy to press charges against you since you’re of age. And finally, I would have no qualms whatsoever in writing to *dear Narcissa* to tell her that the little girl who dreams of being her daughter-in-law tried to cruciate the witch whose torture has given her nightmares. Somehow I think *dear Narcissa* would find that type of behavior disqualifying.”

Astoria’s eyes were wide, and Hermione was pleased to see that she had shrunk down in her chair.

“Now get out,” spat Hermione. “And while I know you don’t care about House points, I’m certain some of your House mates do. So I’ll have another fifty points for trying to cast an unforgivable curse on a teacher. And I’ll also take twenty for your distasteful interpretation of the Hogwarts uniform. You can explain to your friends why Slytherin House just moved into last place in a single night.”

Astoria just gulped and then fled the classroom. Hermione waited until she was clear of the door before sighing and collapsing into the same chair Astoria had just vacated.

Don’t let it get to you. Don’t let it get to you.

Hermione couldn’t believe she had lost her composure with Astoria. She knew that Astoria was a lovesick teenager. She *knew* it. And yet, Astoria had voiced the one fear that kept Hermione up at night whenever she thought about Malfoy: that maybe Malfoy would never

touch her because she was muggleborn. He hadn't touched her yet, not really, despite weeks of flirtatious behavior. But all the flirtatious behavior in the world didn't mean anything unless he was prepared to act on it. Her heritage would obviously be a barrier for him. What if he was never able to get over it, even if he wanted to?

Hermione sighed. She had snapped, and then Astoria had snapped back harder. Hermione didn't regret the threats she made nor the points she took. Nothing excused the cruciatus curse. But Hermione had to acknowledge that Astoria probably would have left well enough alone if Hermione had not risen to her bait. Hermione groaned and buried her head in her hands. She stayed that way for a long while and lost track of time, as she wondered if the one thing that she couldn't change about herself would be the thing that held Malfoy back forever.

Draco

Draco had had an exceptional evening. Though he was disappointed to miss Granger, her Christmas gift to him had truly delivered him from an unfortunate fate, and he was determined to celebrate it with all the good cheer the holiday season wrought. She had disappeared earlier in the evening to make good on her gift, and Draco knew he wouldn't see her again that night. So once the staff room had cleared out, he found himself making his way back to the Room of Requirement, even though it wasn't one of his usual nights for it.

Draco had been a bit perturbed when he first realized that somebody else had discovered Hermione. He was the jealous sort, the possessive sort, and he didn't like to share his things. While Hermione technically belonged to Hogwarts, Draco felt in his heart that she had truly become his at the first touch, and all players before or after him would never appreciate her the same way he did. So he had wrinkled his nose a bit when he realized somebody else had been in the Room of Requirement and banished the stack of classical repertoire that had been the only thing he had ever played.

Draco knew that most of the composers whose pieces he played were muggle, though a couple of them were actually muggleborn wizards. Classical music, along with much of the art he had studied as a child, certain cornerstone pieces of literature, and even the title that Draco would inherit one day, were all muggle things that purebloods had embraced. As an adult, Draco had no trouble seeing the irony in it. But it was something he had pointedly ignored as a child while he nodded along to his father's denouncement of all things muggle before turning to his piano and playing a sonata.

Still, for the pureblood children who were musically talented, the repertoire was ever classical and would never stray from canon. So Draco had been entirely unfamiliar with the odd music he found the first night after Hermione's other player had discovered her. He had to admit, however, that his first taste of it had intrigued him.

Ever since that night, the music had changed up with some frequency, though evidently the muggleborn player – because Draco was sure this person hadn't been raised in the wizarding world – had a few favorites. *Summertime* made it into the rotation rather frequently, as had a song that was ironically called *Piano Man*. His favorite so far had been one called *Music of the Night*. The lyrics to that particular song had rather captured Draco, and he sang it several times, wishing Granger could have heard him.

The muggle music had been very curious to be sure, but over the course of weeks Draco had discovered he quite enjoyed it. Every now and then he called the room to provide his classical repertoire, but most of the time he played what the other player preferred, singing along whenever he could. It was technically much easier than the classical pieces he could play, but something about it was arguably more enjoyable. Music had always been an outlet for him, but he found it even more so when he wasn't trying to practice, and he was just playing for pleasure.

The other player had added holiday music to the rotation in early December, so Draco finally got his first taste of muggle carols. Many of them were oddly catchy or had lyrics that were surprisingly profound, and he had had more fun than he cared to admit working through piece after piece in an astonishingly large book.

Tonight he had celebrated Granger's Christmas gift to him by playing all of his newly discovered favorites and singing them at the top of his lungs.

"Truly he taught us to love one another. His law is love and His gospel is peace. Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease."

"Once again as in olden days, happy golden days of yore, faithful friends who are dear to us will be near to us once more..."

"Then ringing singing on its way, the earth revolved from night to day. A voice, a chime, a chant sublime, of peace on earth good will to men."

"And so I'm offering this simple phrase for kids from one to ninety-two. Although it's been said many times many ways, Merry Christmas to you."

"Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth! Hark! The herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn king!'"

Yes, Draco would never admit it to anybody, but he absolutely *loved* muggle Christmas music. And ever since it had first appeared, he had fully forgiven Hermione's other player for finding her too.

After a delightful hour or so in the Room of Requirement, Draco slowly made his way back to the staff common room. He was in a remarkably good mood and was humming *White Christmas* to himself, still lost in the happy memories of his evening and the warmth that he

felt when Granger volunteered to rescue him from Astoria. He was so lost in thought that he nearly ran headfirst into the object of his affections at the entry to the staff common room.

“Granger!” he said in surprise. “I thought you would have been done ages ago.”

She gave him a tight smile as she called out the password for the portrait to swing open, and Draco felt his good mood start to seep out of him just a little bit. Something was wrong.

“What happened?” he asked carefully.

She just sighed and slumped a little. “It’s nothing, really. But you may want to let Horace know that Astoria’s the reason Slytherin House lost ninety points tonight.”

Draco was stunned. Granger was known to be stricter than other professors, but she had never taken that many points from a single student before.

“So let me ask you again,” he said as they made their way down the hall toward their rooms. “What happened? What were the points for?”

Granger stopped at her door and turned to face him. He saw she was grimacing a bit. “Let’s see, I took twenty for calling me a mudblood.”

Draco felt a thudding in his ears at this, but he forced himself not to react since Granger herself rolled her eyes.

“Then I took another twenty for showing up to the detention half undressed, presumably in an effort to attract you.”

Draco snorted at this, but gave her a knowing look.

“And the last fifty was because she tried to cruciate me, although...”

“*SHE WHAT?!*” shouted Draco, and Granger slapped her hand over his mouth.

“Shhh!” she hissed. “You’ll wake the others!”

Draco was torn between wanting to kiss her hand and wanting to keep shouting. He settled for grabbing her hand gently and pulling it off of his mouth, though he didn’t let go of it.

“Granger. Say that again. She tried to cast the cruciatus curse on you?”

Granger shifted uncomfortably. “She started to, yeah, though obviously I stopped her.”

“I’ll have her expelled,” he said.

She smiled at him a little, and he could see some of the warmth return to her face. “Don’t worry about it. I threatened her with enough that I doubt she’ll ever try it again. And to be fair, I may have provoked her just a bit.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I fail to see how you could have possibly said *anything* to warrant that sort of reaction from her."

Granger shrugged a bit uncomfortably. "Well, no. But she did say something about how you're going to date her once she's out of Hogwarts. And maybe I said that if you were going to date any Greengrass it would have been Daphne since she's the same age as you and much prettier than Astoria."

Draco just stared at her for a long moment and then burst out laughing. Granger clapped her other hand over his mouth, though he could see she was struggling not to laugh now too.

He let her stay that way until he calmed enough before grabbing her other hand in his, and now he was holding both of them. He squeezed them just a bit.

"Granger, I didn't think your Christmas gift could get any better, but it just did. Thank you for that. Though I still say she needs to be punished."

"I took ninety points, Malfoy. She's not going to be popular in Slytherin House tomorrow."

He inclined his head. "That's true. Though if she ever does something like that again..."

"Then I'll tell Minerva and have her expelled," said Granger quietly. "But I really think it's over. She's officially terrified of me."

"Good girl," said Draco, and to his surprise she reacted to those words in the most astonishing way.

She flushed, and her pupils dilated, and Draco got the very faintest whiff of it again for the first time since that night at her parents' home – the scent of her arousal. Somehow those two little words had done that to her. He had only smelled it once before, but it had driven him so mad he knew he would have recognized it anywhere.

Fuck me.

Draco felt like he was in some sort of trance as he pulled her just a bit closer so he could be absolutely certain. Then raised her hands to his lips and kissed the back of them. She was staring at him and made that same throaty little gasp he had heard all those weeks ago when he brushed her arse, and now she was close enough that he was *sure* his nose wasn't deceiving him. He felt himself immediately harden in response to it.

I could kiss her, he thought suddenly. *I could try.*

But they were standing in the middle of the hallway where anybody could see them. She had just come off of a horrendous detention. And he knew kissing her wouldn't be enough for him. He needed to know she was in for everything, because once he started he wasn't sure if he would be able to stop.

She doesn't do casual shagging you bastard.

Already second guessing himself about it, he let the moment pass and slowly lowered her hands. He let them go a bit reluctantly, but it seemed to make her snap out of whatever spell she had been under, and she took a step back as she blinked.

“I should be going,” she said. Draco just nodded.

She turned to let herself into her room. Just as she walked in, Draco called, “Granger.”

She stopped and turned to him.

“Thanks,” he said sincerely. “I mean it.”

She gave him a genuine smile at this, but didn’t say anything more as she shut the door behind her with a click. Draco opened the door to his own room and walked in, and he leaned against it as soon as it was shut.

I should have just kissed her. Goddamnit.

Draco woke up to the faint sounds of screaming.

On and on it went, as he automatically scrambled out of bed and raced toward the door. He didn’t even pause as he barged into Granger’s room to find her thrashing around in the sheets.

“Granger!” he called as he raced toward her.

She didn’t respond.

“Granger!”

Without thinking about it, he sat down on the edge of her bed and grabbed her shoulders.

“Granger!”

She gasped as she woke up. Draco released her and started to move away, but she sat straight up and flung her arms around him. Automatically Draco slipped his arms around her and squeezed, marveling at the feeling of her for the first time.

She was slight. She had always been on the small side, except for her curves, which were rather generous for a witch of her size. And now Draco could feel some of those curves pressed into him, just a couple layers of thin fabric separating them. They were soft and luscious, and she was so very warm from her sleep.

It was only now that Draco realized she was clinging to him, shaking slightly, as she buried her face into his bare shoulder. He moved one hand up over her back to rub slow circles, as he allowed himself to dip his face over the top of her head and inhale. The smell of verbena,

grapefruit, jasmine, and amber inundated him, and made him slightly lightheaded. She smelled better than any witch he had ever been with, and he could never get enough of it.

After a long while he felt her start to relax, and she shifted ever so slightly to pull back from him, though she didn't drop her arms from around his neck. Draco found himself staring down into her face, her eyes huge in the moonlight. Draco was keenly aware of just how close they were, and his mind drifted to one of his indistinct plans and fantasies about her.

He had imagined this moment. At some point when he was trying to figure out how to start something with her, he had had the notion that maybe he would be able to do it after one of her nightmares. Maybe he would show up and rescue her from it, and it would play on her Gryffindor sense of chivalry. She would end up in his arms, and she would stare up at him with gratitude and a little longing, and he would dip his head and capture her lips. He had stroked his own ego as he imagined it. He had thoroughly romanticized it in his own mind, never once thinking the moment would *really* happen that way, and so he hadn't thought it all the way through.

But now they were here, and she was looking at him exactly like he had imagined. He knew he could kiss her. He was almost sure she would let him. And after kicking himself for allowing the opportunity pass earlier that night he was sorely tempted to do it. But as he stared down at her, he realized he didn't want it to happen this way. He didn't want her to be scared and sad. He wanted her to be desperate, certainly, but desperate for *him*, not desperate for comfort in general.

Instead of spurring him to kiss her, the moment inspired something else: a certainty that Healer Robinson had been right to suggest the potion. Draco had toyed with the idea ever since that session, but he had resisted both for selfish reasons and also due to some lingering fear that she might not trust him enough to take it. Seeing her like this though, he knew he had to try. As much as he loved having her in his arms, it wasn't right when he had something to offer her that might be able to fix it.

"A bad one then?" he asked softly.

She just nodded, and slowly released him as she looked down, clearly a bit embarrassed. "Sorry, I... yeah. Worse than usual, actually."

"Don't apologize. I get it."

She gave him a slightly skeptical look. "Do you, though? Our deal was supposed to be mutual. But I'm the only one who screams like a banshee from her sodding nightmares."

This is as good an opening as any.

"Yes, well, there's a reason for that."

She gave him a hard look. "Silencing charms? I wondered. But you said you wouldn't..."

He held up a hand to stop her. "It's not silencing charms. It's something else. Hang on, I'll be right back."

He disentangled himself from her sheets and made his way toward his room, only now realizing he was only in his boxers again. He sighed and threw on a pair of joggers when he got to his room, though he didn't bother with a shirt. She had already had her face buried into his chest after all.

He grabbed the potion and some papers and made his way back to her room. The lamp next to her bed was on now, but she was still sitting in bed, with her knees pulled up against her chest under the sheets. She shifted over slightly when he approached her, and he sat on the edge of her bed again.

"So in the spirit of finding Christmas gifts for somebody who is impossible to shop for..." he started.

She gave him a small smile at this.

"The reason I don't wake up from nightmares is this," and he handed her the potion.

She took it curiously. "What is it? It doesn't look like dreamless sleep."

He snorted. "It's not. It's my mastery potion."

Her head whipped up to stare at him. "Tell me," she said, and Draco heard a note of excitement in her voice, mixed with a dose of skepticism.

She's afraid to hope, he realized. But he could see the eagerness on her face, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt now that she would try it once he explained it to her.

"During the war and especially afterwards I took a lot of dreamless sleep. My nightmares were terrible, and it was the only way I could get a full night of sleep without reliving all of the terrible shit I had seen and done."

She was nodding along, and Draco was sure she had done this too.

"It's addictive, as I'm sure you know. I tried to limit myself to once or twice a week, but it wasn't enough. And when things didn't resolve after the war I started taking it more often than I should have. It got really bad once I was back at Hogwarts. It was the only way for me to get enough sleep to survive school."

Again, she was nodding. Draco was relieved she seemed to understand and wasn't judging him for it. His history with abusing dreamless sleep was something that had become a bit of a Malfoy family secret. Only a handful of other people knew about it, and Draco hadn't been sure how she would react if she found out.

"The Ministry required a year of mind healing as part of my plea deal so I wouldn't go to Azkaban. I didn't realize this during my sentencing, but Shacklebolt himself assigned the mind healers to those like me who were required to see one. Most of the other witches and wizards who were required to see one had been imperiused or excessively confunded. St. Mungo's has a whole team that specializes in that type of healing, and he engaged them for the Ministry during that first year. For me though... well, I was a marked Death Eater.

Shacklebolt knew enough to realize I was a reluctant one, and I had gotten in over my head.

But because I was a Death Eater and the Dark Lord had lived in my home, I had also seen things and done things that were terrible. I was in much worse shape than the others who were assigned mind healers. So he sent me to a trauma specialist who happens to be muggleborn. My mind healer stayed connected to the muggle world as he went through Hogwarts, just like you did. And after school he returned to the muggle world for a time and got something called a doctorate in muggle psychiatry and psychology while he was working on his certification as a magical mind healer.”

Granger’s eyes were huge as she listened to this. Draco had never told anybody this much detail, but now that he had started he couldn’t seem to stop.

“I was resistant at first. I thought the whole notion of mind healing was bullshit, and I resented the fact that I had to be there. I didn’t think *anybody* could understand what I had been through, and I had no interest in seeing this bloke the Ministry had assigned to me twice a week, especially not when he was a muggleborn.”

She had a stricken look on her face, and he sighed. “I didn’t believe any of the lies about blood purity and power by that point. The war had convinced me that none of that was true. But I was still just eighteen years old, totally shell-shocked from the war, and woefully ignorant. I was so resentful that I clung to any flaw I thought I could find in him, and for a time I thought his muggle heritage was his biggest failing. I couldn’t bring myself to believe that muggles would know something about healing that wizards didn’t already know. So I was a prejudiced, snotty little bastard to him for a few sessions, until he finally called me out on it.”

Her face relaxed at this a bit, and he gave a mental sigh of relief.

“He pointed out that we were forced to see each other twice a week for fifty-two weeks. I could either accept his help and consider that maybe some of the bullshit I had been fed my entire life was wrong, or I could resist and become a dreamless sleep addict within the next few months. He told me that he would be paid for one hundred and four sessions regardless of what I chose to do, and it was no sweat off of his back if I wanted to be stubborn about it. I didn’t like it, but I realized the next year with him would be unbearable if I didn’t figure out a way to manage with him, and his point about dreamless sleep hit me like a bludger. I hadn’t told *anybody* about how much I was using it and certainly not him, but he had somehow pegged me as a wizard with a dependency issue within our first few sessions. And that convinced me to take him seriously.”

Her face had softened, and Draco half expected her to interrupt him at any moment, but she didn’t. She seemed spellbound by everything he was telling her.

“Once I stopped resisting him so much I learned that he knows a lot about stress and nightmares and what happens to the brain during repeated traumas. It’s his speciality. Many of his techniques are based on muggle concepts, but they worked fairly well for me, and I improved enough to get off of dreamless sleep. But even with his help I was still having nightmares once or twice a week, and I had nobody to wake me up from them. I was afraid to use any dreamless sleep at all in case I fell back into it, but I had to find *something* I could take so I wouldn’t be trapped in a nightmare whenever one began. He and I discussed it quite

a bit during our sessions, and it led me around to potions, because it was my best subject in school. I spent the second half of eighth year experimenting, and I eventually landed on a precursor to this. I brought it to Slughorn at the end of the year, and he agreed to apprentice me to help me work out the kinks in it, provided we commercialized it, and he got a twenty-five percent stake in it once it was ready for sale.”

Now Granger looked appalled. “He apprenticed you to make a bloody *profit*?”

Draco couldn’t help but smile a bit at her outrage.

“Slughorn never liked me much in school, and the commercial potential for this potion is huge. You know he’s never cared for Death Eaters, and the Malfoy name was rubbish right after the war. But he’s a teacher, and he’s as self-interested as any other Slytherin. So I told him I had been an idiot and that I was stupid to join the Death Eaters. I told him I had been to a muggleborn mind healer, and he had helped me work out the theory behind this potion. I told him I was flirting with addiction, and I needed his help to avoid it. I was so close I could almost see the finish line with my potion, but Slughorn was the master and not me.

He decided I was being genuine and took pity on me, and we cut our deal. I owed my solicitor the following day, and we formed a potions company. I own seventy-five percent, and he owns twenty-five percent. I seeded it with family money. So we had a practically unlimited budget for research, and it’s all been above-board with the potions guild, the Ministry, and St. Mungo’s. Over the last few years we have developed quite a few other medicinal potions and salves that are improvements on the things healers typically use. But our alternative to dreamless sleep is the furthest along and will be going to market within the next year or so, once the clinical trial is complete. My mind healer has been helping us recruit patients for it. In fact, I’m almost certain Annie Pilcher is trialing a pediatric dose because the last report I received on it indicated we had a new patient, female, aged fourteen, who was doing a clinical trial with it after the death of her mother. I referred her to Healer Robinson for mind healing after September 11.”

Granger was gaping at him now, and he smiled a little. He could tell she had a thousand questions for him.

“Tell me how it works then,” she finally said. “Does it keep the dreams away?”

Draco furrowed his brow as he thought about the best way to describe it. “No, actually, and that’s why it’s non habit forming.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“It’s a rather mild potion. It doesn’t stop you from dreaming, and it’s not a sedative. It doesn’t force you to sleep. It just helps you keep your mind once you *are* asleep. You maintain awareness that your dreams aren’t real. You can choose to watch the nightmare or you can... nudge it along so to speak until a new dream starts. You maintain a modicum of control over it. You don’t have so much control that you’re in an awake state. I’ve never been able to really *choose* what I’m dreaming about... but you have enough awareness to guide it a little bit. And you won’t be trapped in a nightmare with no way out.”

She looked at him with amazement as he described it to her.

“I probably should have offered it to you awhile ago, but it’s still in clinical trials, and I didn’t know if you would trust me to...”

“It’s fine,” she said quickly. “Truly. It’s amazing that you even came up with it.”

He gave a slight sigh of relief at this.

“Well you can have as much of it as you want. The brew is obviously a trade secret, but I developed it so I make it for myself off label. I can make it for you too. I’ve been on it for a couple years, and it works. In fact, I sort of trained my brain away from nightmares while using it, and after a while I stopped taking it every day. These days I only take it when something starts to trigger the nightmares again, just to course correct.”

She looked even more amazed at this, so he reached for the papers. “My mastery paper and the clinical trial data have all the details, and you are welcome to read about it first.”

She took the papers from him slowly. “I do want to read about it because it sounds exceptional. But I want to try it first. I trust you. This is one dose right?”

He nodded, as warmth flooded him. She trusted him enough to take it without reading up on it first. He could hardly believe it.

She smiled at him, uncorked it, and drank. She gave him an odd look afterwards.

“What?” he said.

“It tastes delicious.”

He gave her a small smile. “Well sure it does. We’re trying to sell a potion that people are willing to drink every single day. So we borrowed the attraction concept from amortentia. The flavor changes based on whatever the consumer is attracted to.”

Her eyes were gleaming now. “That’s brilliant, actually,” she said. “Tell me Malfoy, what does it taste like for you?”

He sat back and studied her for a bit. “Funny you should ask. It used to taste like the blueberry tarts the Malfoy house elves would make every July when the berries came in. It was always my favorite dessert as a child. But ever since I came back to Hogwarts it’s turned rather... citrusy. And floral. It’s like tasting summer.”

It was true. Draco suspected he knew what had caused the shift. The new flavor reminded him strongly of the scent that lingered around Granger. He found himself craving it so much that his potion had taken on notes of it and had become practically aromatic. He wondered if it would change again if he ever got a chance to actually taste her for real.

“What does it taste like for you?” he asked.

“Firewhiskey,” she said slowly. “But like the smoothest firewhiskey you could imagine. It has no bite. And there’s something else mixed in too. There are undertones that remind me of herbal tea... chai, maybe... and something else that I can’t quite pinpoint but that’s almost earthy in a way...” She gave him another odd look as she trailed off, but then seemed to shake herself out of it. “Suffice to say I’ll have no trouble drinking it every day.”

He smiled as he rose. “Then sleep well, love. I’ll bring you a stash of it tomorrow.”

She smiled at him too. “Thank you. Really, if this helps even a little bit... well, it will be the nicest thing anybody has ever done for me.”

He smiled at her. “I’m not sure I could claim that. But I hope it will help. And if for some reason it doesn’t, I’ll still be next door.”

She nodded as he turned to leave. He heard the faintest whisper of “Night,” as he shut the door behind him.

It’s official, he thought as he laid back down in his own bed. I’ve completely fallen for her. I need to just fucking do it and find a way to make her mine.

Chapter 10: SWOT

Draco

The last thing Draco did before break was load Granger up with his special potion.

“I have to go back to the Manor for break,” he said. “There is some family business I have to attend to. But this should be plenty until we’re both back at Hogwarts.”

“It works wonderfully,” she said with enthusiasm. “I’ve had nightmares every two or three nights for years. They don’t always make me scream, but I’ve had rather poor sleep ever since Dumbledore died. The last few nights have been amazing. As soon as one starts it’s like I can fast forward to the finish and see what comes next.”

Draco felt a bit guilty for how long it had taken him to tell her about the potion, but she brushed it off. “Nonsense. You didn’t know. And it’s not surprising you thought I would be skeptical about it at first. We had some warming up to do.”

Of course, this hadn’t been the *entire* reason Draco didn’t tell her about it at the beginning of the year, but he resolved to move on from his guilt. Just a few nights of it had made her practically buoyant, and even her complexion – which Draco had always thought was rather nice to begin with – was improving with better sleep.

With some careful prodding the next morning, Draco had also coaxed more details about the nightmare she had had that night.

“It was probably because Astoria brought your mother into it when we argued,” said Granger grumpily. “Usually it’s just Bellatrix torturing me during that particular nightmare, but this time it was Narcissa too. And I *know* she never would have. I do know it, truly. But that’s what made it even more terrifying.”

While Draco also believed his mother was incapable of the cruciatus curse, Granger’s observation did raise an obvious question.

“Why are you so sure about that?”

“She wrote to me after the war to apologize. We corresponded a few times before we dropped it, but I’m certain she wouldn’t have done it herself.”

Draco didn’t know what to make of this information about his mother. It felt rather out of character for her. But he tucked the odd news about his mother’s apology away and decided to focus on his own apology to Granger.

“Granger, I’ve never said I’m sorry for all the shit I did to you as a kid. And also that day at the Manor... I just stood there while Bellatrix tortured you. I should have intervened. I can’t

tell you how much it has haunted me that I just stood there and did nothing. It was one of my recurring nightmares too.”

She gave him a soft look and said, “I forgave you ages ago. I never really felt like it was your fault in the first place. You clearly didn’t want to hurt us, but you were terribly outnumbered. Everyone else in the room behaved much worse than you did. I forgave your mother for it when she apologized, and I can certainly forgive you for whatever minor role you played in it.”

His heart nearly burst as she said these words, and he realized his mind healer was right yet again. On some intellectual level Draco had known she must have forgiven him already, but it still helped him to hear her say it. He hoped his apology helped her too.

With Granger’s sleep issues sorted for the holidays and the two of them parting on as good of terms as Draco could hope for given the circumstances, Draco turned his attention to his next project: retribution against Astoria.

Draco’s rage against Astoria had taken on a life of its own. The fact that she had tried to cruciate Granger in the first place was bad enough. But once he realized that it had been the thing to trigger that final nightmare and his own mother had made a cameo appearance in it, he was out for blood.

He started with the low-hanging fruit. He informed Slughorn about her behavior, and Draco was pleased that Slughorn was also horrified. He wrote to the Greengrasses and gave Astoria two weeks of detention as soon as she was back from break, supervised by him this time.

Then he moved on to Minerva and relayed the story to her on a confidential basis. Minerva agreed not to expel Astoria per Granger’s request, but she made a permanent mark in her student file about it. That file would follow her if she ever sought a job.

He thought about contacting the Ministry. He was sure that Potter or any of the aurors wouldn’t look kindly on what she had tried to do. But Draco decided he would go further than that and really go in for the kill.

“Mother,” he said, rising to give her a kiss on the cheek as she joined him in the solarium for brunch the morning he arrived home from Hogwarts.

“Darling, I have missed you so,” she said, settling in at the table. “You know this job of yours has grown on me, but I am positively forlorn without you.”

Draco felt the familiar mixture of affection and exasperation for his mother. She had always been dramatic, and her matchmaking schemes in particular drove him barmy. But he couldn’t deny that she loved him, and he loved her too.

“Well the job is going quite well. I’m getting along with my colleagues, and I quite enjoy teaching as it turns out.”

“And you have some exceptional students, I’m sure,” said his mother with a familiar glint in her eye.

Draco tried not to snort at the predictability of it. His mother *had* come around to his teaching job at Hogwarts once it occurred to her that he would be in daily contact with eligible seventh year students. She had been writing to him all term with not-so-subtle hints that he should pick one to date after the school year was done.

“Yes, well about that, I actually need your help with one of them,” he said.

Narcissa immediately straightened up, practically bouncing with excitement.

“Calm down Mother, it’s not what you think. I don’t need help dating one. But I do need you to ruin Astoria Greengrass for me.”

Narcissa slumped, but then furrowed her brow. “I can, certainly. But she was on my short list, Draco. Surely you know that. She would make a lovely Lady Malfoy.”

“Four days ago she tried to cast the cruciatus curse against Hermione Granger during a detention. I want her finished.”

Narcissa just stared at him in shock. “But... how?” she asked weakly.

Draco gave her a stony look. “Astoria’s been practically throwing herself at me all term, fueled, no doubt, by certain hints that I may be interested in making her my Lady Malfoy if she makes herself agreeable to me. I have no interest in her whatsoever, so when she contrived to have a solo detention with me Granger kindly offered to supervise it in my place. During the detention they argued, and Astoria tried to curse Granger. Of course, Granger is rather skilled in defense so Astoria was unsuccessful, but I want her to pay for it. Even though Granger wasn’t cursed, it did trigger nightmares about her torture at the Manor, and this time she dreamed that *you* were torturing her too. Evidently Astoria talked about you right before she tried to curse Granger.”

Narcissa just gaped, before straightening up again. “Very well. Astoria is obviously unfit if she’s willing to resort to violence to resolve conflicts. That’s a disappointment, but I will take care of it.”

Draco nodded with satisfaction. Narcissa drove him crazy, but she would always side with Draco in the end, and he had been sure she wouldn’t approve, regardless of her feelings about Granger.

But then he watched as his mother’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t realize you knew Miss Granger that well. I’ve always gotten the impression that you two despised each other.”

“We’ve grown up and become friends. She’s student teaching too. Transfiguration. She will take over for Minerva fully next year.”

Narcissa raised her eyebrows at this. “I had read that she joined the staff, but I didn’t realize she would be taking over for Minerva.”

“Yes,” said Draco. “The article in *The Prophet* was sparse on those kinds of details. But suffice to say she’s teaching a core subject and will be a Head of House next year just like

me. We're quite friendly now. And that reminds me. I want you to invite her to the New Year's Eve ball."

"I have for the last three years," said Narcissa. "I always invite Harry Potter too."

Now it was Draco's turn to stare. "Obviously I'm pleased," he said slowly, "but I always thought..."

"That I didn't approve of them? That's not the case, but our social circles don't overlap much. We owe Mr. Potter a great deal for keeping us out of Azkaban. And I daresay we owe Miss Granger even more than that given the appalling treatment she received in our home that day. I always invite both of them, along with a guest of their choice of course, but they have never consented to come."

Draco was thinking quickly.

"Have the invitations gone out yet?"

Narcissa shook her head. "I will be sending them this afternoon."

Draco felt a rush of nerves and excitement at this, but he forced himself to breathe.

Time to execute the plan.

"Let me have Granger's before you send it. I can probably convince her to come."

Draco saw Narcissa had an odd expression on her face, but she nodded slowly. "Very well. I'll ask Sully to bring it to you before it gets posted."

"Excellent," said Draco, smiling broadly. This encounter with his mother had been unexpectedly positive. "And Mother, in the future, please don't try to set me up with my students. I have no interest in them, and it could ruin a wonderful job."

She gave him a passive look. "Very well dear, I'll stay out of it. Though do bear in mind that magical pregnancies can take quite a while so it will not do for you to delay the matter of dating and marriage indefinitely. You will need to secure your line for the title."

"Yes, mother, I know," he groaned. He had been hearing this for most of his life.

"Good, just as long as you keep that in mind," she said lightly, and then she turned to her food.

Draco could hardly believe he was getting off so easily, but he decided to chalk it up to his mother's good humor at having him back in the Manor for the holidays.

"Thank you Mother. And after brunch, we should go to the music room. I have some new holiday music you need to hear. There's a piece called *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* that I think you'll really like."

Hermione

Hermione took a deep breath as she prepared to floo to Grimmauld Place and plead her case to Harry.

Malfoy had left Hogwarts several days earlier, having given her the gift of a good night's sleep for the first time in over four years. If Hermione didn't already have a massive crush on him, that would have sealed it for her. It was so thoughtful, so utterly *brilliant*, that she was practically head over heels now.

And then the annual invitation to Narcissa's New Year's Eve ball arrived, and Hermione's heart stopped.

She had known it was coming. She had even kept the dress she purchased for the Ministry gala on the off chance she decided to attend this year. It was a smashing dress to be sure, though a tad formal for the Ministry. But Hermione had loved it so much she ordered it anyway, and perhaps a tiny part of her knew she was really hoping to wear it to something *else* so that a certain *somebody* would see her in it. Narcissa's ball was even more formal than the Ministry gala, and her dress would be perfect for it. But she had never gone to Narcissa's ball before, and she was sure she would be out of her depth in that crowd. So she had remained on the fence and had waffled about it until the invitation itself arrived. Then she opened it to find a note from Malfoy enclosed that she had read so many times she had it memorized by now.

Granger,

Mother tells me she's been inviting you to her little route for the last several years. I'll forgive your prior failed appearances since I'm certain my (hopefully former) shitty behavior was the thing holding you back. But from now on, and especially this year, I must insist that you attend.

To satisfy the swotty side of your magnificent brain, I have already completed an actual SWOT analysis for your perusal to help you make up your mind:

(S)trengths: It will send a strong message when you show up looking like you own the place... or rather, looking like you own the bloke who owns the place.

(W)eaknesses: Other than my obvious weakness for you, I will confess that Mother has the elves weaken the champagne as the night goes on. She would Avada me if she knew I let you in on her little secret, but it's really for the best. She started doing it after Theo Nott's father got so drunk one year he streaked through the ballroom (prewar obviously). It cost a fortune to keep that out of the papers, and it was decided that weak champagne is a small price to

pay to avoid future public displays of Death Eater dick at Mother's Very Respectable Ball. Never fear, though: I'll hold back our best, undiluted bottle for you.

(O)pportunities: While I won't be able to neglect my duties as host entirely, I believe that opportunities abound at a 5+ hour party where the entire point is to make merry and drink the aforementioned (questionable) champagne. Do you want to drink until we can't remember our own names? We'll drink. Do you want to eat nothing but chocolate all night? I'll order Honeyduke's finest. Do you want to swap out Mother's color coordinated fireworks for something developed by George Weasley? I'm in, as long as the Manor is still standing when we're done. I could go on, but you get the picture. The opportunities are too many to list.

(T)hreats: There are no discernible threats to you because (i) Mother takes security seriously and (ii) we have previously established that you can kick anybody's arse. But YOU will pose a threat to others if you show up, namely Rita Skeeter. In fact, I do believe you will finally fulfill your deepest fantasy and give old Rita a legitimate heart attack if you really lean into it and actually dance with me.

Please say you'll come, I'm begging you. If you turn me down then you will be condemning me to an entire night of hiding from the Anabelle Rawlinses of the world. Please take pity on me, love. You could never be that cruel.

Only yours, DLM

PS: Please make Potter and Ginny Weasley come too. He will be getting an invitation as well. I solemnly swear to make nice with Potter for you in exchange for your appearance. If that doesn't prove to you the depths of my desperation, then I'm certain nothing will.

Hermione realized, or maybe just hoped, that he was asking her to attend as his date without saying as much, and she finally knew what her answer would be.

She immediately sent back her reply saying she would come and that she would talk to Harry and Ginny about it on Christmas Eve. And so here she was, ready to call in every favor Harry owed her if it meant that he and Ginny would come too so that she would have somebody to talk to in case Malfoy's hosting duties pulled him away for long stretches.

To Hermione's surprise, the first person she saw when she exited the floo wasn't Harry, but Ginny.

Oh this is perfect, she thought with relief.

"Hermione!" squealed Ginny, and Hermione laughed as Ginny launched herself toward Hermione for a hug.

"Gin! It's been ages!"

“Oh I know! We have missed you so much! But tell me, how is Hogwarts really? Your letters say all is well, but we’ve all been a bit worried...”

“Because of Malfoy?” asked Hermione in amusement.

“Well yeah,” said Ginny shrugging.

“Malfoy and I are friends now, Gin. I know it’s hard to believe, but people change, and he did. The war did a number on him, and he’s been seeing a mind healer for years because of it. He’s been great. I’m actually closer to him than to Neville now.”

Ginny’s eyes widened, then narrowed, then widened again. “Oh Merlin, you fancy him!” she shouted, just as Harry walked in.

“She fancies who? Neville? Hey Hermione!” said Harry as he pulled her in for a hug.

Hermione mentally groaned, but knew there was nothing for it.

“Not Neville,” she said firmly.

“Malfoy! Draco Malfoy! Hermione was just telling me all about him!” squealed Ginny.

Harry gave her an appalled look, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

Here goes nothing.

“Honestly Harry, he's very different. He’s a wonderful teacher, he’s a brilliant potions master, and he’s been nothing but kind to me all year. He’s been seeing a mind healer ever since the war ended.”

At this Harry’s eyes narrowed. “He was required to see one as part of his plea deal.”

“Yes, for a year. He’s continued it voluntarily. You know me, Harry. I was very cautious around him at first, but I promise you he’s different.”

Harry looked like he was still struggling, so Hermione sighed and decided to use her trump card.

“I’ll give you a concrete example. He’s the flying instructor now because Madam Hooch had an accident right before term started. He refereed the first quidditch game of the season. It was Ravenclaw versus Slytherin. He fouled Slytherin so many times they were forced to play a clean game, and Ravenclaw won.”

At this Harry’s eyes got huge. “Bloody hell. I guess he *has* changed then.”

Both Hermione and Ginny rolled their eyes at this, but then they exchanged a look and Ginny winked.

“And you fancy him...” said Harry, as though the fact still pained him.

“Why shouldn’t she?” asked Ginny, loyally. “If he’s really changed like she says? I mean, he’s ridiculously hot.”

It’s official, Ginny is my favorite Weasley, thought Hermione with affection. If Ginny was convinced then Hermione’s job would be done for her. She would make all the others fall in line.

Harry, however, looked at his fiancée in disgust.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh please, I’m engaged to *you*, you great prat! Malfoy is no threat to you. But for Hermione? It’s perfect! They’re actually at Hogwarts together! Do you know how rare that is?”

“We aren’t together Ginny,” said Hermione quickly.

Ginny eyed her. “Maybe not yet, but you *want* to be.”

Hermione sighed and nodded.

“And does he want to be?” asked Ginny.

Hermione shrugged. “I think so. Maybe. We’ve had a lot of baggage to work through. We’ve been going slow, but it is going... that way, I hope.”

Harry wrinkled his nose, but finally decided to participate. “Alright, Malfoy then. Has he asked you out?”

“Well now that you mention it... I’m going to the Malfoy New Year’s Eve ball. He begged me to attend and rather implied it’s a date, though of course he has to host so he won’t be with me the whole night. I need you two to come also in case I don’t know anybody else there.”

“But we aren’t invited,” said Ginny in confusion.

“Of course you are,” said Hermione, now staring at Harry who was turning red. “Narcissa invites Harry and me every year, along with a guest if we want. Malfoy’s letter said you were getting an invitation, Harry.”

Now Ginny rounded on Harry. “Do you mean to tell me you’ve been holding out on me all this time? That party is supposed to be the bash of the year!”

Harry groaned. “It’s the Malfoys Gin! Narcissa only invites me because I testified for her and Draco.”

“Well maybe that was the case in the past, but this year Hermione is friendly with Malfoy and wants to get even friendlier. She needs moral support, and I need to see what this party’s like for myself.”

Ginny turned to Hermione now. “We’re in, obviously, though I’m going to need a dress. Do you have the invitation?”

Hermione pulled hers out and handed it to Ginny.

“*White tie*,” she read as her jaw dropped. “Merlin, I’ve never been to something that fancy! Oh this is going to be so much fun!”

Harry just groaned. “I don’t even know what that means, Gin!”

“If you go muggle, it means you have to wear tails,” said Hermione, smiling slightly. “It’s more formal than black tie.”

Harry looked ill.

“I’m sure there’s a dress robe equivalent,” Hermione added, “but you’ll need a shop to tell you what it is because I have no idea.”

“Yes, and Hermione and I have to wear gowns and gloves,” said Ginny excitedly. “And Harry, we’ll need to get into your vault for some jewelry. Murial isn’t speaking to me at the moment because she thinks I’m a slag for living with you before marriage. There’s no way she’ll let me borrow the tiara.”

Harry groaned again, but the witches ignored him.

“I went to the library right before I came here and checked out some back issues of *Witch Weekly* and *The Sunday Prophet* society pages that covered prior balls so we can see what’s appropriate, Gin,” said Hermione. “It does look very fancy. And I think there’s some dancing. Here, I’ll show you.”

Hermione pulled the magazines and newspapers out of her bag and handed several to Ginny, who started to flip through them curiously.

“Definitely a mixture of magical and muggle,” muttered Ginny. “So Harry, you can go all muggle if you want to make a point. Lots of family jewels on display, I see. Bloody hell. And the dancing...”

Ginny flipped through several more pages and Hermione did as well, scanning the articles, until she found it.

“As in prior years since Lord Lucius Malfoy became indisposed, his son Draco opened the dancing with Lady Narcissa Malfoy.”

Hermione snorted to herself at the description of Lucius’s extended stay in Azkaban, but then winced a bit as she studied the picture. She had rather been expecting this, but she was very out of practice.

“Based on the pictures there’s some regular dancing, but they also do the waltz,” said Hermione, flipping the page around and showing them the picture of couples spinning

furiously around the dance floor. “That’s the Viennese waltz. It’s very traditional for New Year’s Eve. Muggles do it too, actually.”

“Do you think there’s a muggle place that will give us a lesson then?” asked Ginny. “We wouldn’t want the press finding out.”

“Oh you can’t be...” started Harry, but Ginny rounded on him.

“Harry James Potter, you will take me to this bloody ball, and you will *dance* with me dammit, or you will not get *anything* from me for at least the first three months of 2002. Do I make myself clear?”

Harry shrank down and just nodded, as Ginny huffed, and Hermione tried not to laugh.

“I’m sure we can find a place, Gin. Like I said, muggles do it too. I’ll call around on Boxing Day or the day after and find a place to give us all a quick lesson. I learned as a child, but it’s been years. I could use a refresher.”

Harry had such a pained look on his face Hermione couldn’t help but laugh.

“It will be fine, Harry. And on a different note, I have some news for you. Malfoy and I are pretty sure that one of the first year students is your second cousin on your dad’s side. Malfoy knows all the pureblood family trees, and I swear he looks exactly like you except for the eyes.”

For the first time since she had arrived, Harry sat up with interest as she told him all about little David Fawley.

Christmas passed with the usual noise and chaos that the Weasleys always brought to the holiday, though this year it had gotten a bit noisier by the arrival of the tiniest Weasley grandchildren: Louis Weasley, who was the second child of Bill and Fleur had been born just after Hermione started at Hogwarts. Then little Fred Weasley had been born a month later, the son of George and Angelina. Barely three months old, Fred was already as boisterous as his namesake. It was the first time Hermione could ever remember George looking totally out of his depth.

“When he finally learns how to crawl we’re fucked,” was all he said, before snatching away a button Fred had managed to pull off of George’s shirt with a delighted squeal.

Ron had pulled Hermione aside to tell her he was planning on proposing to Lavender at some point in the new year.

“That’s great, Ron,” she said sincerely. And she meant it. The news hurt much less than she thought it would. “And I have some news for you too.”

Ron looked at her curiously.

“I’m going to the Malfoy New Year’s Eve ball. Harry and Ginny are going too. Draco invited me personally.”

Ron looked gobsmacked, and then he started to look angry.

“Don’t you *dare*, Ronald Weasley,” said Hermione firmly. “You know he works at Hogwarts too. We’ve become friends. Very good friends in fact, and I’m quite hopeful something will come of it.”

“But *Malfoy*?”

“Yes, I’m quite aware of who Malfoy is and what he did. I’d wager that after living next door to him and eating nearly every meal with him for the last four months, I know him rather better than you do at this point,” she said firmly. “The war, followed by some rather aggressive mind healing, made him grow the hell up and change. I’m telling you about it because I assume you want to hear it from me instead of from the papers.”

“It’s going to make the papers then?” asked Ron, turning a bit green. Hermione knew that Ron was aware of what that meant for her.

“I’m not sure yet, but it’s possible. If it does, please trust me that I know what I’m doing. And give me the space to find my own happiness too if it works out that way. I’ve been single for far too long.”

Finally he sighed and nodded, and Hermione felt an enormous sense of relief. Harry, and especially Ron, were the hardest. The rest of the Weasleys could find out from the papers if it came down to it, but those two had needed to hear it from her. And with that task done, Hermione was finally able to turn her attention to the upcoming ball.

Hermione found Ginny chatting excitedly with Fleur and her mother in one corner about it.

“Ooooh and zere will be gowns and gloves and all zee jewels,” said Fleur a bit dreamily. “I would love to attend myself one day. I read about it in zee papers every year.”

“Are you certain Ginny?” asked Mrs. Weasley a little worriedly. “I did kill Narcissa’s sister, you know...”

“Yes, and her husband planted the diary on me that opened the Chamber of Secrets. I’d say we’re pretty even. But Bellatrix is gone and Lucius is in Azkaban. Narcissa seems determined to move on with her life,” retorted Ginny.

“Oh very well,” said Mrs. Weasley. “It *is* supposed to be the most glamorous thing... I do wish Murial would let you borrow the tiara, though I think she attends most years. I imagine she will want to keep it for herself.”

“She wouldn’t let me near it,” snorted Ginny. “But Harry’s taking us to Gringotts next week after I get a dress. We’ll find something.”

“Hermione, dear, will you be shopping with Ginny then?” asked Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh, I’ll go with her, certainly, but I already have a dress for myself. I was planning on going to the Ministry gala – I had gotten a dress for it and everything – but then John Dawlish asked me to attend with him, and I panicked and told him I wasn’t going. So I’ll just wear that.”

“John Dawlish?” asked Ginny with a look of disgust.

“Believe me, I know,” groaned Hermione. “And he asked me right after he insulted my dueling skills.”

“That arse,” said Ginny promptly. “Well you’re much better off with Malfoy than with him anyway.”

And this both Fleur and Mrs. Weasley turned to stare at Hermione.

“Draco Malfoy dear?” asked Mrs. Weasley a bit hesitantly.

Hermione mentally groaned and shot an accusatory look at Ginny, who didn’t look apologetic at all.

“Yes, and he wrote her this long, lovely letter about all the reasons she needed to attend the ball this year,” said Ginny with a smirk. “Hermione let me read it, and I can tell he’s very into her, but evidently they’re taking it slow. He hasn’t even kissed her yet.”

“Well we work together,” said Hermione with a huff. “And there’s some bad history, you know. And family expectations and all…” she trailed off awkwardly. “There are a lot of hurdles.”

All three witches gave her a slightly sympathetic look at this, but Mrs. Weasley said, “Well dear, you’ve always known your own mind. Merlin knows you all were just children during the war. If he’s grown up, then I’d say good on you. He’s very handsome, very wealthy, and obviously quite bright if he’s teaching at Hogwarts like you are. As for family expectations… well, as a mother I can tell you that my children defy my expectations on a daily basis, and they always have. I imagine Draco is very aware of what his family expects when it comes to that sort of thing, and if he decides to ignore them, then you’ll have to trust that he knows what he’s doing.”

Hermione looked at Mrs. Weasley in surprise, but she felt another weight lift as she looked at the kind face of her surrogate mother. “I… thank you. I think I needed to hear that.”

“Of course, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley. “I’m sure it was no secret that I hoped you would end up with one of my boys because I’ve always loved you like a daughter. But if that’s not to be, then I want you to find some wildly handsome man who will sweep you off your feet. It’s no less than you deserve.”

Hermione felt tears prick her eyes as she pulled Mrs. Weasley in for a hug. She pulled back to find Ginny and Fleur beaming at them. Then Fleur spoke up.

“I may not be invited to zee party, but I am the most – how you say, *glamorous* – of us all, no? So I will be in charge of zee ‘air and makeup and things. You must take me to the shop with you Ginny, and I will need to see your gown ‘ermione. You must be absolutely *magnifique*.”

Hermione was surprised by this, but she saw a determined glint in Fleur’s eye that was reflected in Ginny’s and Mrs. Weasley’s as well.

“Fleur’s right,” said Ginny. “She’ll make you perfect, Hermione. You’ll knock him flat on his arse.”

Hermione felt a slow smile begin. “Let’s do it then.”

Chapter 11: Beginnings

Hermione

Fleur, it transpired, was a font of knowledge when it came to things like balls and galas. She knew the best and most discreet shops to find a last minute dress for Ginny. She had strong opinions on the precise shade of ivory both witches should select when it came to gloves.

She was remarkably adept at fashion spells and informed Hermione that she could do anything to her dress that was required to make it *parfait*. And Fleur was also quite skilled at the waltz, having been privately tutored at home by a French dance instructor for years before attending Beauxbatons.

Given all of this, Hermione wasn't terribly surprised to learn that Fleur had taught Bill something about dancing too.

"Well of course I could not marry 'im with two left feet!" she declared.

So on Boxing Day, Bill and Fleur dropped off Victoire and baby Louis at the Burrow and then came to Grimmauld Place for a crash course in dancing for Harry and Ginny and, to a lesser extent, Hermione. Bill was rather good and was able to show Harry the basics, and then he paired with Hermione while Harry attempted to lead with Ginny.

"*Non*, 'arry, you must embrace zee witch and *lead*. You must not count out loud! You must *feel* zee music!"

"Fleur, this is impossible," groused Harry.

"Stop thinking about it so much," said Bill reasonably. "Don't look at your feet. Look at Ginny and just move. You're trained as an auror and you could have flown for England for Merlin's sake. You're not uncoordinated."

Still, despite Bill and Fleur's best efforts it was all going rather poorly until, to Hermione's utter shock, Kreacher showed up and began to observe.

"Master Harry's hands are too high. You must roll your shoulders back. Straighten up, arms down more... and a little more. Yes, right there. And now use your grip to lead."

Kreacher had a remarkably good eye for the male lead, though he finally resorted to stasis charms to teach Harry the correct frame.

"Kreacher, I can't move my arms," said Harry with mounting panic.

"Master Harry must not fret. 'Tis how Kreacher taught Master Regulus to dance. Master Regulus was superb. Once Master Harry learns the frame, the rest will come together."

Slowly, but surely, Kreacher released the stasis charms until Harry held the correct frame on his own, and eventually his feet fell in line as well. For her part, Fleur continued to correct Hermione and Ginny until they were both doing it the right way, and by that evening all three of them could manage the basic steps to the waltz.

“I expect you to practice!” declared Fleur. “I will check on zee progress the next time I am ‘ere!”

“I will make sure of it,” said Kreacher, bowing low to her. “It was a pleasure watching Madame Weasley dance. The House of Black, of course, has always been known for its dancing. Kreacher will make certain Master Harry does not disappoint.”

“Bloody hell,” grumbled Harry.

For her part, Hermione felt much more confident after spending the entire day spinning around the Grimmauld Place ballroom with Bill and then Harry. Everything she had learned as a child thanks to her Granny Granger had come back to her, and the confidence she had gained as an adult had helped tremendously. She knew her Granny Granger would have been thrilled to learn she was attending a fancy ball at a lord’s home. Granny Granger had been rather high in the instep herself, and she had been the one to insist on Hermione’s own lessons in etiquette and deportment. She always said Hermione needed to learn these things so she “wouldn’t embarrass the Granger name by using the wrong spoon at a state dinner someday.”

Hermione also discovered that she had a secret weapon in Kreacher, who had eventually come around to Hermione during her long stint at Grimmauld Place after the war.

“Miss Hermione is hoping to impress Master Draco Malfoy?” asked Kreacher with interest, after he overheard Hermione and Ginny talking about it at dinner the next night.

“She is,” said Ginny.

“Then Kreacher will help,” croaked the elf. “Kreacher knows Master Draco’s elf Sully very well. Kreacher will inquire.”

Hermione had no idea what Kreacher was going to be inquiring *about* necessarily, but she decided it couldn’t hurt to see what he came up with.

Sure enough, the evening of the party rolled around, and Hermione found herself ensconced in a bedroom with Ginny, Fleur, and Kreacher, all of whom were working on her dress.

“It’s stunning Hermione, but I think we can make it even better,” said Ginny.

“*Oui*,” agreed Fleur. “Zee skirt should be a bit fuller and lighter - eet should float,” and she waved her wand and the fabric below Hermione’s waist multiplied and turned gauzy.

“Master Draco’s favorite color is sapphire,” said Kreacher. “And Sully informed Kreacher that the ballroom will be in shades of white and blue. Miss Hermione’s dress should be lighter.”

Fleur nodded in agreement and waved her wand, and the navy blue of her gown lightened a bit to a true sapphire blue.

“Your ‘air, ‘ermione it must be up,” said Fleur, flicking her wand. To Hermione’s surprise, her hair settled into a perfect knot on the top of her head, with just a few curly tendrils escaping.

“How on earth did you do that?” asked Hermione in amazement. “I’ve never been able to make it cooperate with a wand.”

“Practice,” said Fleur simply.

“What about the neckline, Fleur?” asked Ginny, looking at the dress critically.

“Zee straps must come off,” said Fleur, and with another flick Hermione’s dress lost its spaghetti straps. “And zee waistline should drop just a bit,” added Fleur, and with another flick the tightness in the bodice dropped a few inches to fully outline the flare of Hermione’s hips before the skirt opened fully. “And finally, zee back and zee breasts...” then one final flick and Hermione felt the line of her back lower and the entire bodice tightened considerably so the whole dress would stay up.

“Bloody hell,” muttered Hermione as she stared at herself in the mirror. “My boobs...”

“Zey are *tres magnifique!*” declared Fleur.

The tighter bodice had pushed Hermione’s breasts up, and she rather felt they were taking on a life of their own over the slightly curved neckline of her dress.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit much?” she asked, as she studied her curves.

“Absolutely not,” said Ginny. “You fill it out perfectly. And it’s bound to tempt him.”

“Yes, Master Draco is rather enamored by Miss Hermione’s figure,” chimed in Kreacher. “Sully is eager to see Miss’s dress.”

Hermione gave the elf an amazed look. “How on earth did Sully know that?”

“Elves are observant, Miss,” said Kreacher, shrugging. “Sully suggested Miss Hermione emphasize her figure and wear the same perfume she favors at Hogwarts. It is Master Draco’s favorite. He’s commented on it to Sully more than once.”

“Good Lord,” said Hermione, turning back to look at herself in the mirror.

“Makeup,” said Fleur, waving her wand and Hermione’s eyes became smouldery, her cheeks assumed a pretty blush, and her lips turned a shocking shade of red.

“And zee jewels,” added Fleur, now rummaging through the piles of boxes Ginny had swiped from Harry’s vault. Between the Potters and the Blacks he had a rather astonishing collection, and Hermione had added her own things to the mix for consideration as well: a bracelet and some hair combs she had inherited from Granny Granger.

“Zee combs are a must,” said Fleur, pulling out the sapphire and diamond combs Hermione had put in the pile of jewelry. She placed them artfully in Hermione’s hair, and nodded in approval. “Zee earrings must be fabulous and long – zey should emphasize your neck.” She opened a few boxes until she found a pair of sapphire and diamond drop earrings. “*Parfait*,” she declared.

“They are from the House of Black,” added Kreacher. “There is a matching necklace and bracelet too.”

“No necklace,” said Fleur quickly.

“Are you sure?” asked Ginny. “Lots of witches will be wearing them.”

“*Oui*, but not ‘ermione. ‘er neck and *decolletage* should be bare. It will make zis young man think about kissing it all night. Zee earrings and combs are elaborate enough, and she can wear zee bracelet too.”

And with that, Fleur handed Hermione the gloves and bracelet, instructed her to apply perfume behind her ears and between her breasts, and then turned to work on Ginny while Kreacher left to dress Harry.

“Master Harry will be perfect when I am finished, never fret,” he croaked. The three witches watched in amusement as he assumed a determined look on his face before apparating away.

“I think Harry’s finally met his match with Kreacher,” said Hermione.

“It’s fantastic,” said Ginny. “Harry can’t bring himself to tell Kreacher no.”

Fleur fussed over Ginny for several long minutes. “You will be in zee photos just as much as ‘ermione,” she pointed out. And so she arranged Ginny’s hair low, with smaller earrings than Hermione was wearing but with a truly spectacular diamond necklace to compliment the deep purple gown she had chosen.

“I found it in Harry’s vault,” said Ginny quietly. “Do you think it’s too much?”

“*Non*,” said Fleur. “You are engaged to ‘im. Zis will be yours soon enough. Wear it.”

Ginny gulped, but nodded, and Hermione couldn’t help but think her closest female friend looked truly stunning.

At long last the witches made their way downstairs toward the fireplace and found Harry waiting for them with a brooding expression on his face. It cleared the moment he saw Ginny.

“Bloody hell Gin you look amazing,” he said, striding forward to give her a kiss. “You look great too Hermione,” he added kindly.

Hermione just smiled. “You clean up well, Harry,” she said, and he really did. He had opted to go muggle, and he was in a tailored coat with tails, and a white vest and tie. Kreacher had even managed to tame his hair just a bit, and he had evidently coaxed Harry into wearing a

ring with the Potter crest and some matching cufflinks that peeked out from his coat as he moved. Hermione thought he looked like a young lord.

“Ready then?” he asked.

“Yes, let’s blow Rita Skeeter’s mind,” said Hermione.

Chuckling slightly at that, all three of them grabbed some floo powder and were soon *whooshing* away to Malfoy Manor.

Draco

Draco had been on pins and needles all day, waiting not-so-patiently for the party to begin and Granger to arrive. His mother had been oddly pleased to learn that Granger and then Potter and Ginny Weasley would be coming this year, and she instructed Sully to do some reconnaissance to discover their favorite drinks and foods to make sure they could accommodate.

“Harry will put the stamp of approval on the House of Malfoy, dear,” she explained to Draco. “You know I’ve been working to resuscitate our name ever since your Father’s unfortunate choices during the war.”

Draco had never really appreciated the way his mother glossed over his father’s sins during the war, but he had to acknowledge she had been working to move on from it in her own way. She had reached out to her sister Andromeda, and they had developed a cordial, if rather cautious, relationship. She redirected their charitable efforts toward muggleborn-leaning causes. And evidently she had been trying to attract two-thirds of the Golden Trio to her ball for the last several years.

According to Narcissa, Potter’s presence at *any* social event that wasn’t Ministry-sanctioned or Weasley-related was so rare it would be considered the social coup of the year to have him there. She was sure it would finally clear the Malfoy name for good.

To celebrate his attendance and make him feel welcome, Narcissa decreed that there would be more Ogden’s than usual and an abundance of his favorite treacle tart. Draco was a bit surprised to hear that Granger and Ginny Weasley both very much favored champagne, though they didn’t drink it very often.

“Kreacher says it goes right to their heads!” squeaked Sully. “But it is a favorite of both of them, and they drink it together for witches’ night.”

That was easy enough, and Draco put a special bottle aside for Granger, as promised. If he managed to pull off his plan tonight, knew he wouldn’t dare sleep with Granger if she got

very drunk – that could be disastrous – but he wasn't one to be opposed to a drunken snog, provided she would actually remember it the next day. He rather thought she might be willing, though he was reserving final judgment until he saw how she behaved with him in front of the media.

In a fit of optimism, he instructed Sully to prepare a room for her next to his, just like at Hogwarts, and Sully was to coordinate with Kreacher to retrieve clothing and other necessary items for her once she left for the party. He also told Sully that the room was to be held just for her and no others. Draco knew that the Manor always housed a shocking number of guests who were too drunk to comfortably floo home after the party, and in fact Narcissa's morning-after brunch had become rather famous in its own right. But Draco insisted that nobody but Granger would be sleeping there. It was hers if she wanted it.

And now he waited as guest after guest who *wasn't* Granger arrived through the doors of the Malfoy ballroom.

"Lovely as usual, Narcissa."

"Terrible weather we're having, yes?"

"The treacle tart this year is quite good."

Draco hardly paid any attention, though he was pleased to see his old friends Theo Nott and Blaise Zabini arrive together.

"Draco!" roared Blaise, slapping him on the back.

"Blaise," said Draco, giving him his first genuine smile of the night. "Good to see you again. How is Italy?"

"Warmer than England, though you know I'll never say no to one of Narcissa's parties."

"It's true," said Theo sidling up, and Draco had another smile for him. "You really *must* come visit us during one of your breaks, Draco. It's been an age."

"Maybe this summer then," said Draco, mentally wondering what Theo and Blaise would both say if they knew the real reason Draco hadn't visited them between Christmas and New Year's like he normally did was because of all the reconnaissance he had been doing to attract a certain curly haired witch. He hadn't been able to spare the time this year.

They chatted for several more long minutes until Narcissa was giving Draco a look that told him he was being a poor host by ignoring everyone else. They finally moved along, but only after they both wrung a promise out of Draco that he really *would* come to Blaise's home in Italy for a few days the following summer.

Once Theo and Blaise moved on, he once again found his mind drifting toward Granger as he greeted guest after guest, until the voice of Astoria Greengrass made him snap out of it.

"Draco," she purred, as she approached him with her mother Soleil.

Draco shot his mother a furious look. He was sure his mother would have excluded her from the guest list, but she raised an eyebrow impassively in a sign that clearly told Draco she was biding her time for the right moment.

“Miss Greengrass,” he said coldly. “I’m afraid your last potions essay was not up to standard. You will need to rewrite it after break.”

She tittered. “Oh well I had that detention you know. I mean Professor Granger can be so unfair. And she hates Slytherins of course, the points I lost were completely...”

“*Dear* Hermione is coming tonight!” chimed in Narcissa. “I am so pleased to make her acquaintance again. And her friend Harry Potter will be attending as well.”

Astoria and Soleil both looked absolutely shocked by this news.

“But she’s...” started Astoria.

“She’s a close friend and colleague,” finished Draco, in a tone that told the Greengrasses they were dismissed.

They moved away, their heads bent toward each other.

“That’s trouble, Mother,” muttered Draco.

“Oh we’ll take care of Astoria, make no mistake about that,” said Narcissa impassively. “But I rather think that if you play your cards right with Miss Granger you may be able to reinforce the message tonight. That’s why I invited them.”

Draco glanced at her. “You surprise me, Mother,” he said.

“I’m full of surprises my dear. I’ve been suggesting purebloods for the last three years because those are the witches I know. But at this point, I’d accept nearly anybody if you would actually *date* one of them.”

Draco turned to stare at his mother in amazement.

“Truly?” he asked.

“Truly,” she said. “I care about the title far more than Malfoy blood purity. The title will pass to Teddy Lupin if you don’t have an heir. That would be better than having it pass to your father’s cousin, but I would still prefer it stay in *your* line with *my* grandchildren. That is what I care about.”

“I’ll try,” he said. “I really will try.”

“That’s all I ask, dear. Now then, why don’t you go tell Miss Granger she looks stunning? I see she’s wearing Aunt Walburga’s sapphire earrings and bracelet. Of course... Mr. Potter must have inherited them from my cousin Sirius. I haven’t seen them since you were a very small child. Most of the older crowd will think you gave them to her since they are part of the Black family collection.”

Draco whipped around to see Granger walking through the door, a look of awed enchantment on her face. Draco felt all the air leave his lungs as he stared at her. She was in a gorgeous dress that was his favorite shade of blue. It had no straps or sleeves, but hugged her curves perfectly, making her breasts mound over the top just a bit. The skirt was full and layered, the blue fabric shimmering as she walked. He zeroed in on the earrings and bracelet his Mother had been talking about, and he realized they were statement pieces. They would be noticed, and he was sure his Mother was correct that the older witches would remember them and place them as something from the Blacks. Draco couldn't remember seeing them before, but they were very distinctive.

Perfect, thought Draco with delight. He had daydreamed about sending her jewelry to stake a public claim on her, but he hadn't done it because she wasn't really his yet. He was sure it would overplay his hand with her too. Seeing her arrive wearing Black family jewelry was a turn of events he couldn't have planned better if he had tried. Even though he knew she had borrowed the jewelry from Potter, the fact that Potter had inherited Sirius Black's share of the Black fortune was not well known. Draco knew his mother was right, and everybody would think he had sent it to her.

As he studied her, she turned around to talk to Ginny Weasley, whom Draco saw was wearing a purple gown with a shocking diamond necklace. The moment her back was to him Draco's mouth went completely dry. Her dress somehow plunged down into a low V, the lowest point of which was only several inches above her waist. Draco had no idea how the whole thing was even staying up, seeing as how it had no straps and was supposed to be muggle, but Draco wasn't complaining. It was utter perfection on her, and Draco was absolutely dying to feel her under his hands.

Suddenly semi-erect, Draco shifted a bit to hide the bulge in his pants as he shook off the guests his mother had turned to speak with, and he made his way toward Granger, snagging a glass of champagne from a nearby tray as he did so.

She was still looking around the room in delight, taking in the decor and floating trays of canapes and guests, as he approached.

"Granger," he said, and she turned to look at him in surprise, and then broke into a broad smile.

Gods, she's so beautiful, he thought.

He couldn't help it. He had never done this before, but he stepped close and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, inhaling as he did so. As usual the scent of her made his head spin, and he forced himself to pull back to see the blush creeping from her cheeks down her neck that was tantalizingly bare, all the way down to...

This is actually going to kill me.

"Malfoy," she said a bit breathlessly.

He swallowed and pressed the champagne into her hands. "The first glass," he said. "We'll open the good stuff after midnight. You'll want to pace yourself."

She gave him an amused smile before turning to look at Potter and Ginny who had been watching their exchange a bit curiously and, in Potter's case, cautiously.

"Potter," said Draco, nodding toward him.

"Malfoy," he said. "I hear Ravenclaw won the first match you refereed."

To Draco's surprise both witches rolled their eyes at this.

"Yes," he said, a bit confused.

"That's how Hermione convinced Harry you're a decent bloke now," said Ginny bluntly. "She told him you called fouls on Slytherin during the first match."

Draco smirked at this as Potter reddened and threw an annoyed look at his fiancée.

"You didn't have to tell him, Gin," he said.

"Oh honestly, you two hated each other as kids. Everybody knows it. But one of you is an auror now and the other is a professor, and you share Hermione in a way. Shake hands, make nice, and then get me a drink," she said.

Potter looked at Draco and shrugged. Draco couldn't help but snort with laughter as he held his hand out. Potter took it, and suddenly a camera went off.

"Bloody hell," muttered Potter.

"Front page of *The Prophet* tomorrow, no doubt," said Ginny blithely. "No go be a dear and fetch me that drink," she said.

Potter hurried off to find a floating tray, and then she turned back to Draco brightly. "This is lovely."

Draco just grinned and shook his head. "I might feel a bit sorry for Potter. You have him thoroughly whipped."

"I wouldn't mind whipping him for real, but he's never really been into that," she deadpanned.

Draco's jaw dropped and then he threw his head back and laughed as Granger rolled her eyes but chuckled too.

"Alright, Granger, your friends can stay. Or Ginny can, at any rate. I suppose I'll tolerate Potter too."

Both witches grinned at this as Potter returned with Ginny's champagne.

"Malfoy," he said. "There's something I wanted to ask you. If you have a quick minute."

Draco shot a questioning look at Granger, but she gave him a slight nod and moved aside with Ginny.

Draco turned back to Potter, who was looking oddly nervous now.

“Well?” asked Draco cautiously.

Potter sighed. “I was hoping you could introduce me to your mind healer. Hermione told me about your potion and let me read the research and... well, I could probably use it. Ginny wants me to see a mind healer for my nightmares, and I know yours is familiar with your potion and can get me enrolled in the clinical trial for it. While I was living with Hermione I felt like I had a system in place to handle them, but the nightmares are a lot for Ginny, and I don’t want to push her away because of them.”

Draco blinked. This was totally unexpected, but he nodded slowly. “Sure. He’s here if you want to meet him. Or I can send you his direction after the party.”

Potter looked surprised. “I’d love to meet him tonight. Maybe see if we click.”

“Of course,” said Draco. “He can get you into the clinical trial even if you go with somebody else. But he’s a trauma specialist, and he’s very familiar with what the potion does to your sleep. Here, come with me.”

Draco cast one last look at Granger and Ginny, who were watching them both with slight smiles on their faces as Draco led Potter through the crowd to find Healer Robinson.

“Healer,” he said, as Robinson turned to smile at Draco. “Glad you could make it tonight. I wanted to introduce you to Harry Potter.”

Healer Robinson raised his eyebrows in surprise, but then he relaxed into a smile and shook hands with Potter.

“Mr. Potter, pleasure to meet you of course.”

“Same,” said Potter. “Malfoy recently told my friend Hermione Granger about you, and she suggested I meet you.” Then he shot Draco a look. “And I’m sure Malfoy’s told you a lot about me.”

“Ah,” said Healer Robinson easily. “As to that, I’m afraid I can’t say. Confidentiality you know. But I’ll leave it to you to guess.”

Draco and Potter both chuckled at this and then looked at each other in surprise.

Now it was Healer Robinson’s turn to chuckle as he watched them interact with each other. “Healing takes many forms, doesn’t it?”

“Too right,” said Draco. “You’re the expert.”

“Just one of many, Draco,” he said lightly.

“Don’t sell yourself short,” said Draco. Then he turned to Potter. “Healer Robinson was the person who convinced me to go to muggle London for the first time. It was an eye opening experience, and a testament to his skills.”

Potter gaped at him, and Healer Robinson started to chuckle. “Oh yes, I remember that. Of course I can’t say what we talked about, but I’ll tell you, Mr. Potter, that the look on Draco’s face when he saw the inside of Assos for the first time was absolutely priceless. It had never occurred to Draco to wear anything but robes while flying on a broomstick.”

Potter looked delighted, as Draco rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help but smile a bit.

“They really do slow you down,” said Potter.

“It’s true,” said Healer Robinson. “And Draco here came around to the muggle way of doing things and bought out half the store before I could stop him.”

Now Draco grinned. “It was an excellent use of Father’s money.”

Potter grinned appreciatively at this. “Right you are. Well Healer Robinson, I was hoping I could talk to you about something. Malfoy, do you mind giving us a minute?”

“Of course,” said Draco. “I’ll be with Granger, unless Mother waylays me between here and there.”

Potter nodded, and turned back to Healer Robinson as Draco slipped away, in an effort to get back to Granger before his mother claimed him.

“Ladies,” he said as he approached them.

“Did you introduce him?” asked Ginny eagerly, without preamble. “Harry was going back and forth about it, but I finally put my foot down.”

Draco smiled. “Yes, they seem to be hitting it off. I left them chatting just a minute ago.”

She gave him a brilliant smile. “Thanks, Malfoy. Really.”

Draco shrugged. “I’m always happy to send business Healer Robinson’s way. He’s excellent.”

Granger smiled softly at him, and again he was struck by how lovely she was.

“You’re both stunning tonight,” he said suddenly. “I don’t think I said so earlier.” He was talking to both of them, but looking at Granger when he said it.

Ginny grinned, but Granger blushed.

“It’s fun to dress up now and then,” said Ginny. “And this ball is rather famous.”

Draco nodded. “Yes, and unfortunately Mother has decreed that I’ll have hosting duties until midnight to say hello to everyone. After midnight though, I’m free to do whatever. You’ll be

sticking around past midnight I hope?"

They both nodded. "Good," he said. "It usually goes fairly late. We open all the bedrooms for guests who need to stay the night. Ginny, if you want to reserve one let an elf know. They'd be happy to set one aside for you and Potter. Granger, I already reserved one for you. Mother does a smashing day-after brunch for those who stay the night."

Granger looked at him in surprise, and he just gave her a slow smile. "I heard a rumor that champagne goes right to your head, and we have a bottle to try later. I thought it best to be prepared."

She laughed. "Fair enough, Malfoy. Gin, it might be a good idea for you too. It looks like Harry's found the firewhiskey. Drunken floo rides are the absolute worst."

"You're right about that," agreed Ginny. "If we can stay, then we should. I'll find an elf and let them know. I'm sure Kreacher can bring us a bag."

Draco nodded. "Excellent. Now I'm afraid I need to gladhand a few more people, but please eat, drink, enjoy. Granger..."

She looked at him hopefully.

"Will you save a dance for me? Even though the press is here? The band will be on later."

She smiled. "Yes. I'm ready to send Rita packing."

He grinned broadly at this, feeling lighter than he had in ages to know that she would let the press photograph her with him, and he leaned in to kiss her cheek again. "Then I'll see you later, beautiful," he whispered in her ear, before pulling away a bit reluctantly.

She looked surprised and was doing that full body blush again that made Draco nearly groan with want. But he forced himself to turn and walk away. Midnight wasn't that far off, and then he could have her all to himself.

He sidestepped several eager young witches and cast an annoyed look at Astoria and Soleil who had been watching his exchange with Granger while glaring daggers at her. He made his way back to his mother, who had a knowing gleam in her eye.

"Well?" she asked.

"Granger said she'd dance with me," said Draco. "And she doesn't do that sort of thing lightly because of the press. They're going to lose their minds if she dances with anybody other than Potter."

His mother broke into a wide smile. "Excellent, Draco. Make it count then, yes?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I'm definitely going to make it count."

Chapter 12: Fireworks

Chapter Notes

A/N: I make no apologies for my blatant references to Beauty and the Beast in this chapter lol.

Hermione

Hermione felt like she was in a dream.

The room was stunning, the champagne divine, and Hermione was surprised to see miniature versions of her favorite chocolate mousse floating on trays through the crowd. It was the one thing at Hogwarts she could never resist whenever the elves made it, and she had snagged at least three while she waited for midnight to roll around.

As soon as Malfoy left with Harry, Ginny turned to her and squealed. “Merlin, he’s gorgeous now!”

Hermione couldn’t help but giggle. She was determined to sip her champagne very slowly, but it always *did* seem to make her a bit bubbly. Or maybe it was just Malfoy who was making her bubbly tonight. She was practically giddy that he had sought her out so quickly.

“I know,” she said conspiratorially to Ginny, as she eyed Malfoy. He looked perfectly comfortable in white tie, and Hermione was surprised to see he had gone muggle with it too. She thought it suited him. It was a much more tailored look than the wizarding version she was observing in the ballroom. It was no wonder the society pages couldn’t get enough of him.

And before he had left to return to his hosting duties, he had kissed her cheek *twice*. And he had called her *beautiful*. And when he whispered in her ear it made goosebumps erupt all over. Hermione was positively aching for him.

“Gin,” she said suddenly, taking advantage of Harry’s absence at the bar, “would it be terrible if I just jumped him and shagged him?”

Now it was Ginny’s turn to giggle, but she shook her head. “Not terrible at all. Hell, I’d line up right behind you if I wasn’t with Harry. I’d wager half the witches in here are hoping he picks them for a shag to ring in the new year. But he wants you, Hermione. It’s so obvious to anybody with eyes. You should just lean into it. Let it go tonight. See what happens and don’t second guess it. And then tell me all about it tomorrow.”

Hermione chuckled at her friend as she thought about it. She liked him so much she didn't want to ruin whatever was starting between them. But Merlin, she had only been here a half hour and was already desperate for him. If he really *did* abandon everybody else and spend the rest of the party after midnight with her... she didn't know how long she would be able to hold out until taking matters into her own hands.

Hermione forced herself to make her own rounds with Harry and Ginny, which became significantly more complicated once the entire press noticed they were in attendance. They fielded questions from breathless reporters for a time before shaking them off and talking to a few people they did know.

Predictably, Harry was drawing a bit of a crowd, and several wizards approached Hermione as well, asking for a dance later. She declined all of them, citing the media. She couldn't help but notice that most of them looked rather irritated that she had pegged them so easily.

You and practically every other wizard here only wants to dance so you'll make the papers. But Malfoy wants to dance for a different reason. I'm sure of it.

As she waited for midnight to approach, she kept an eye on Malfoy, and she saw that he had his eyes on her quite a bit as well. His expression seemed to darken every time a wizard approached her, and she was secretly a bit thrilled to think he might be jealous.

But there's no competition here. Not for you, she thought.

She only hoped the case held true for her as well. The number of witches who were trying to get in front of him was almost shocking, and Hermione fought down a surge of annoyance as she counted the fourteenth turn away with a look of disappointment on her face.

At least none of them are holding his attention.

Finally, at long last midnight was approaching, and Hermione lost Malfoy in the crowd for a moment until he suddenly reappeared on the stage that was now full with a band, clinking a knife against a glass.

"Attention!" he called, and the room quieted after several long moments.

"Thank you all for coming tonight. As always, Mother has outdone herself."

The crowd cheered, and Narcissa gave a little wave.

"2001 is coming to a close," said Malfoy. "It was an eventful year in both the wizarding and muggle worlds. Earlier this year, Minister Shacklebolt survived a motion of no confidence with such a favorable margin that I suspect he will be with us for a very long time. We are honored to have him here as a special guest tonight."

Another cheer, as Kingsley waved to the crowd from the edge of the ballroom.

"Hogwarts began a transition plan, and I've been very gratified to be teaching some of your children and grandchildren this past year, despite the occasional melted cauldron and late night wanderings of the students. I am certain my colleagues feel the same way."

There was some laughter at this, and now he was looking directly at her. Hermione felt herself blush.

“And in the muggle world, some of you may be aware that a tragedy of epic proportions took place in the United States on September 11, and much of the muggle world, including Britain, has responded to it. I’m saddened to say that one of my students lost her mother in that attack that killed thousands.”

There was shocked silence at this, and Hermione found herself rooted to the spot. She couldn’t believe Malfoy was talking about muggle events during a largely pureblood party, but she felt something blossom inside of her as she listened.

“We’re all people,” he said. “And as the muggle world enters a state of war, it’s important for us to remember that because we fought a war not that long ago. So now I ask you to raise your glasses and wish for peace in the muggle world, because make no mistake: it touches our world too.”

Hermione found herself raising her glass, along with hundreds of others. “To peace,” said Malfoy.

“To peace!” echoed the guests.

“And now looking forward to 2002,” continued Malfoy, “Personally, I am hoping for new beginnings, new moments, new memories. And I intend to start tonight,” he said with a smile, as he looked directly at Hermione.

Hermione felt her heart beating out of her chest as his words, but she didn’t drop her eyes, and just nodded. His face broke into a broad grin before he said, “I wish you all the fortitude and good luck to achieve your hopes and dreams in the coming year as well.”

There was some clapping at this, as he glanced up at the clock. “We have one minute to go. Grab a fresh glass and get ready to count down with me at ten seconds!”

There was a sudden scramble as glasses were refilled and replaced until, “Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One! Happy New Year!” and everyone drank.

At these magic words, the ballroom transformed, and Hermione pulled her glass away to gasp as hundreds of candles lit, stars scattered across the ceiling, the stage rose further and illuminated the band, and some great, invisible force seemed to gently clear the guests out of the middle of the dance floor.

“Let’s open the dancing then, shall we?” asked Malfoy. Hermione smiled as she waited to watch Malfoy lead his mother onto the floor. But to her surprise, he banished his glass, hopped off the stage, and started walking directly toward her.

The entire ballroom fell silent as they watched his progress, and then he was right in front of her, with a determined look on his face.

“Care to dance, Granger?” he said quietly as he held out his hand. She bit her lip, but then smiled and took it, and his face split into a broad grin as he pulled her into the middle of the dance floor.

Hermione heard tittering and whispering break out, and the press started pushing to the front of the crowd to catch a picture of this unprecedented sight, but Hermione and Malfoy ignored them, as they turned to face each other.

The first strains of music, and Hermione broke into a smile.

It was the waltz.

Malfoy bowed, and Hermione sank into a perfect, deep curtsy that she knew would have made her Granny Granger proud. Hermione heard the crowd gasp and mutter at this, and she saw flashes of cameras out of the corner of her eye. But she ignored them all. She was solely focused on Malfoy, who was looking at her with surprise and delight.

“Muggles waltz too,” was all she said. He grinned as they both straightened up, and he pulled her to him. Hermione took only a moment to appreciate the feel of his hand on her bare back before suddenly they were off, and she was spinning around the dance floor, just like she had practiced.

He was better than Harry or even Bill Weasley – his sense of musical timing was unsurprisingly perfect, as he led her through turn after turn. The crowd around her was mostly a blur, but before long she did see couples start to join them as the floor filled. Hermione thought she saw a flash of red and black hair that told her Harry and Ginny were in the crowd, and sure enough the cameras were nearly blinding as the press captured this unprecedented event too.

On and on it went, and Hermione’s head was practically spinning as she skated on the tips of her toes, allowing Malfoy to guide her through the dance. At long last, the final notes floated across the room, and the couples broke apart to clap for the band before they started up more contemporary dance music.

“That officially concludes my duties as host,” he said, smiling at her. “But I’m going to need at least one more dance before we break open that bottle of champagne, love.”

Hermione smiled too, and he pulled her much closer, now that he no longer had to maintain a frame. Hermione felt his fingers on her back, lightly tracing the line of her dress. She felt herself shudder, and he smiled slightly.

“Now I need you to tell me the names of every bloke who asked you to dance tonight,” he said.

“And why’s that?” she teased. “Jealous?”

“Very,” he said seriously. “So jealous, in fact, that I’m going to tell the elves to make them all sleep in the dungeons instead of the bedrooms. Maybe that will make them think twice next time.”

Hermione couldn't help it, she started to laugh.

He grinned down at her. "Then again, seeing as how none of them are trying to interrupt me, I take it you turned them down?"

"I did," she acknowledged. "They weren't happy about it."

He smirked and leaned down. "Good girl," he said in her ear, and Hermione felt herself melt just a bit at the words. They had such an odd effect on her. For some inexplicable reason they made her feel hot and sensual and all his. She remembered he had said it to her once before, and the same thing had happened that time too.

Malfoy must have sensed her reaction because she felt his hand tighten on her lower back, and she heard a softly muttered, "*fuck*," before he started tracing the back of her dress again. She gasped slightly as he slipped one finger into the edge of the fabric just a bit, but she didn't try to stop him and pressed herself into him encouragingly. She thought she heard him groan, but he didn't stop either, and they swayed together like that with slow, tempting touches until finally the song came to an end.

He released her and then reached down for her hand.

"Let's get out of here," he muttered, and he started pulling her toward the double doors at the end of the ballroom. She struggled not to laugh at the looks on the faces of all the witches she passed, including a sour-looking Rita Skeeter. Hermione just grinned at Rita and winked as Malfoy pulled her closer to the doors. She knew she would probably pay for that later, but she didn't care. Malfoy was making it clear to everybody around them that he chose her, and Merlin help her, but she chose him too. The very last person she passed was an irate-looking Astoria Greengrass, and Hermione finally lost it and started to laugh as Malfoy finally pulled her through the doors.

At the sound of her laughter, he turned around and grinned back at her, and then started to laugh too when he saw the string of disappointed witches in their wake. But he pressed on, leading her out to a large terrace and the night air that must have been charmed for warmth, before he pulled her down some steps and into a garden that was mercifully empty. Only now did he slow his pace as he led her to a bench.

"Sully," he said, and a little elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Bring us that champagne, will you?"

She nodded and disappeared before reappearing just a moment later with two glasses and a bottle that Hermione recognized was very nice.

Hermione took the glasses, while Malfoy uncorked the bottle and poured the champagne into a glass for each of them. He clinked his glass against hers, and they each sipped.

"This is good," she said, keenly aware that they were finally alone and practically pressed into each other on the bench.

“Have as much as you want,” he said. “We have more.”

“You’ll have to carry me to bed if I drink as much as I want,” she said, smiling a bit.

“I wouldn’t hate it,” retorted Malfoy.

They were quiet for a moment until Hermione finally asked, “So what are the papers going to say tomorrow?”

He looked at her a bit cautiously, but seemed to relax when he saw she was smiling.

“They’re going to say I’m trying to rehabilitate my reputation with you.”

“And I’m digging for your gold,” added Hermione.

“Cheers, love,” he said grinning now. “You are more than welcome to dig away. Though they’re going to think I’m helping you along with it.”

“And why’s that?” she asked in amusement.

“Your earrings,” he said simply. “And that bracelet. They’re from my family’s collection.”

Hermione stilled as she turned to look at him in confusion. “They’re Harry’s. He inherited them from Sirius.”

Malfoy nodded. “Yes, the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. My mother’s a Black. She recognized them.”

Hermione suddenly understood, and her eyes widened, as she started to panic a little.

What would Narcissa think?

“Oh God...”

He grinned. “Relax. Mother certainly doesn’t care. And they suit you.”

Hermione felt her panic subsiding. “So you’re saying...”

“That they’re distinctive. Guests from Mother’s generation will recognize them. They’ll think I gave them to you since Mother is the last Black alive who wasn’t disinherited along the way, and I’m her only child. Most of them have no idea Sirius’s share went to Potter. In fact, most of them don’t think Sirius had anything to pass along in the first place. Mother once told me that Great Aunt Walburga spread rumors that Sirius was disinherited after he had a falling out with his family. Supposedly she even tried to do it, but they wrote his trust too well when he was born. Walburga kept it under wraps, and Mother didn’t even find out about it until Grimmauld Place passed to Sirius and not to her or Bellatrix when Walburga died. Suffice to say, the number of people in that ballroom who know the truth is very small.”

Hermione was torn between amusement and exasperation. “Oh my God,” she said again.

He just laughed at her expression before looking at her thoughtfully. “Now Mother did say there was a necklace too.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Yes.... I thought about wearing it, but ultimately decided that less was more.”

She was certainly not going to tell Malfoy the *real* reason she had left the necklace off, but she could see him staring down at her neck where it should have been and thought Fleur might have gauged it perfectly.

“Yes...” he said softly. “Definitely less.”

Hermione felt herself heating again, and the champagne was warming her just a bit from the inside too. She didn’t know how much more of this innocent flirting she could take, but she decided she really couldn’t just jump him in the gardens. Other guests could come outside at any moment. Hell, some of the witches they had passed on the way out were probably scouring the gardens for them already. She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. “So we’ve done mingling, dancing, champagne — though we obviously have more to go there — I won’t make you give me a whole tour, but why don’t you show me your favorite spots?”

Hermione *hoped* his favorite spots included some place where others weren’t likely to wander in.

“Deal,” he said as he topped their glasses. “Guests will be coming into the gardens soon enough anyway.”

He reached for his wand and banished the champagne. “I sent it ahead for us,” he said before standing and reaching a hand down for her. She took it, and he helped her up. He didn’t let go of her hand as he led her back onto the terrace and into the ballroom. He ignored most of the guests, though he did nod to his mother, and Hermione made eye contact with Ginny who winked at her and smiled. He pulled her through the whole room, and Hermione saw a few more flashes of cameras as they passed the press before making it to the doors. They slipped through them, and Malfoy pulled her down a couple of corridors and finally stopped in front of a pair of ornate double doors.

“Ready?” he asked.

Hermione nodded, and he pushed the doors open. Hermione gasped as she walked in, finally seeing the famed Malfoy library for the first time.

She walked forward, turning in a slow circle to take it all in. There were shelves upon shelves of books, all anchored by a large reference table and comfortable looking chairs in front of an enormous fireplace. The ceiling was vaulted, and she saw railing above her with a cat walk that told her there was a second story to the whole thing.

Her eyes then fell back on Malfoy, but he wasn’t looking at the library at all. He was leaning against the wall and studying her reaction as he sipped his champagne.

“It’s unbelievable,” she said softly.

“Come on, I’ll show you the transfiguration section,” he said.

Hermione lit up at this suggestion, and Malfoy smiled a little as he led her toward a small staircase that was tucked away in one corner. They made their way to the second story, and he pulled her into a row of books that opened at the end toward a clear area of floor. Hermione saw it contained a comfortable reading chair near an exterior door that led out to a balcony.

“Here,” said Malfoy pointing out some rows of books nearby. “This entire section of the stacks is transfiguration. You can have whatever you want.”

Hermione gave him a startled look, but she couldn’t help but begin perusing, and Malfoy sat on the arm of the chair as he watched and nursed his champagne. Hermione was trying to make up her mind when a loud boom made her look up in surprise. The fireworks had begun.

Draco

She was so lovely and had fit in his arms so perfectly. The skin of her back was soft and mesmerizing, and her reaction when he called her a good girl had nearly set him off. He had done it again just to see if the first time was a fluke, but it wasn’t. She responded to it, and it made her want him. He was sure of it. He wondered what other things he could say to her to get her to lean into him that way. And of course she was wearing that scent that made Draco practically drunk with desire whenever he got too close to her. He had smelled it strongly when he leaned down and whispered in her ear, and he had lingered there far longer than he meant to.

And now, as he watched the witch he wanted more than anything browse his family’s library, he thought she looked utterly perfect there. He could watch her for hours like this, if it wouldn’t drive him mad with a need to finally have her.

The fireworks began right on time, and Draco smiled to himself as she whipped around to stare out the window. He had been thrilled when she suggested a small tour. Draco was going to suggest it himself, but he rather thought the whole thing would feel more spontaneous to her if it was her idea.

As it happened, this wasn’t spontaneous at all. He had timed this perfectly, knowing that nobody else would be up here but them. They would have the best view in the house, and it would be completely private.

“Come on,” he said. “You have all the time in the world to look tomorrow.”

She nodded and followed him out the doors to the small balcony that was inexplicably attached to the second floor of the library. It was just one of those odd quirks of very old architecture, but it had always been one of Draco's favorite spots. It had a fantastic view over the countryside where the fireworks were shot off every year. Even as a child, Draco had always snuck out of bed to this spot when he heard them begin. As far as he knew, nobody but him had ever watched them from up here.

Until now.

Granger gasped again as she saw the vantage point, and Draco muttered a warming charm over them before topping off both of their glasses. He had sent the bottle up here earlier of course.

She was spellbound as she watched and sipped, and Draco was spellbound too. But for once the fireworks held no interest for him. He was too busy watching her, as the colorful lights were reflected in her eyes and across her face and that bare skin of her neck that had been calling to him all night.

He could scarcely help himself as he moved behind her and slipped an arm around her waist to pull her back against his chest. He felt her sigh a little and nestle in, but he needed more. Her scent and warmth and softness were too much, and he couldn't stop himself from leaning down and nuzzling her neck. To his delight she moved her head sideways to give him better access, and he finally kissed her neck slowly, languidly, all the way up from the dip where it met her shoulder up to her ear.

He was suddenly, forcibly, reminded of what Healer Robinson had told him in their last session right before winter break. Draco had confessed to wanting her more than anything, but he was so unsure about how to start that he was going in circles and driving himself mad. He had never had a serious relationship before and didn't know which came first — the dating or the shagging. And he also didn't know what on earth he would do if she wouldn't accept both from him eventually. He was so fixated on her he was terrified of any form of rejection.

"For a witch like Miss Granger, I would say you attempt to establish the relationship first. She already told you she doesn't want casual sex. Even if she would make an exception for you, I think it's best to take her at her word. So you ask her out first. Tell her what you want so you two can be on the same page from the beginning. It can be nerve wracking to put yourself out there first, but communication is key to any good relationship. Try to find joy in the whole experience if you can."

"Joy? How on earth do I find joy in doing something that terrifies me so much?"

"You do it by recognizing that this is a journey. You want a relationship with her. That's your end goal. But there are any number of ways you could get there. Don't be so scared of what she might say at the end that you fail to enjoy the moments leading up to it. You can plan out the night to give yourself something concrete to focus on while you find a way to get her alone. When the moment is right, tell her. But don't be so hung up on the end goal that you forget to savor everything else while you wait."

And so he had done exactly as Healer Robinson instructed. He had planned and plotted, and it had given him actionable ideas so he didn't go mad with half-cocked schemes and fantasies about the night. He wanted to romance her so hard that her head would be filled with him, and she would be amenable to anything he suggested just to get more.

As he romanced her tonight, he found he romanced himself too. Unsurprisingly, Healer Robinson had been right about that as well. Draco had done his best to Savor as it happened. He wanted to Savor every minute, just in case his plans went awry, and he ended the night without her.

As he thought through the night he decided to study her closely, watching her comfort level in his home where she had been tortured, gauging her willingness to be seen dancing with him, observing her carefully to see how she handled the press when they were together. He wanted to be certain before he said anything to her he couldn't take back, because even after all the romance and Savoring, he was still terrified that she would ultimately reject what he wanted to give her.

But so far all lights were green, and now she was letting him bury his face in her neck. The Savoring had just ramped up a rather astonishing degree, and Draco was keenly aware that he hadn't created a contingency plan for *this*. He had expected her to look beautiful tonight because she was always lovely. He had told himself he would find joy in anything she gave him. But the extent of her loveliness and her ready willingness to go along with him tonight had sent his head spinning, and he found himself deviating from his plan over and over again to get more touches of her. And now that he was finally tasting her skin, he knew he had to get a move on or else he would be doing things completely out of order. He was nearly lost already.

Establish the relationship, man. You can do this.

"Go out with me, Granger. Tomorrow... or I suppose tonight, since it's technically after midnight," he murmured over the sounds of the fireworks.

"Alright," she breathed.

Draco sensed no hesitation from her, and he felt both satisfaction and exquisite relief that she had agreed to this, when he knew she had rejected it from others. But there was more, and this was the even harder bit.

"And I want to date you. Exclusively. Publicly."

She turned her head to look at him, and he saw her eyes were huge. His heart was beating out of his chest from nerves, as he waited for her response.

"Really? You mean it?"

Draco could hear the surprise in her voice, but he thought she also sounded pleased and maybe even *hopeful*?

“Yes,” he said quickly. “Look, I know the press is going to be insane, and we’ll have to tell Minerva, but I don’t care. I want this.”

Her face broke into a dazzling smile, and Draco’s heart leapt.

“I want it too. Minerva won’t mind, and the press can sod off. Although...” she trailed off, and now her brow furrowed, and Draco felt a shot of anxiety going through him again.

“What about your parents? Since I’m... you know.”

Draco exhaled, his moment of panic subsiding. “Mother is actually in favor, though she’ll bore you to tears with prattle about fashion and decorating. Father has twenty-two more years in prison to get used to the idea, and he likes to send me weekly howlers anyway. I’m sure he will appreciate having more fuel for the fire.”

She gave him a slightly exasperated look at this but then smiled. “Alright.”

“You’re in then?”

Draco wasn’t sure why he just asked her that, but it all seemed too good to be true.

She nodded and smiled shyly, and Draco felt something fiercely joyful and shockingly possessive roar to life inside of him as he gripped her waist and lowered his head back to her neck. This was true Savoring. This was nothing but Joy.

She gave a contented little sigh of satisfaction, so perfectly feminine that it made his blood heat.

“Where are you taking me then? Tonight I mean?” she asked.

“Palate,” he said.

She whipped her head around to stare at him again. “Wait, really?”

“Why not?” he asked in amusement.

“I thought you were going to say the Three Broomsticks,” she said, looking totally confused. “Everybody suggests the Three Broomsticks. And Palate is absolutely impossible to get into and...”

Draco couldn’t help it, he started to laugh, before dropping another kiss on her shoulder. “I will not be taking you to the fucking Three Broomsticks on a first date Granger.”

She sighed as she leaned into him again and let him continue his attentions. “I rather thought this was our first date,” she said a bit dreamily.

“You tell me, darling,” he said. “Does this count as a first date?”

“Yes, I think so,” she said.

“Fine,” he said. “Then I’m not taking you to the fucking Three Broomsticks on a second date. I’m taking you to Palate. They’re doing a special tasting menu for New Year’s Day. And their wine list is the best in wizarding Britain.”

It was true. It was one of the most exclusive wizarding restaurants in the country, and Draco had called in several favors to get a reservation there for New Year’s Day in the hopes she would agree to go with him. He had thought about taking her into the muggle world first, but he meant what he said: he wanted to date her publicly. If they were seen together at Palate the press would go into a tailspin. He had never taken a witch there before, and it would make it clear just how serious he was about her.

She just started to laugh, and he smiled into her shoulder as he put his champagne glass on the ledge and then started to trace a pattern with his fingers up her arm toward her shoulder and neck.

“Alright,” she said breathlessly. “Palate then.”

“Good,” he said simply.

He moved his fingers a bit lower now to trace the edge of her dress, along the top of her breasts. He felt her shudder, and her breathing started to get heavy.

“You have to watch the fireworks darling,” he said quietly as he continued to stroke her.

“I... I am...” she said.

“Mmmm I think you're being naughty. Your eyes are closed. Be good for me and open them.”

She did, and Draco could see from the side that she looked glassy eyed and barely conscious of where she was.

“Draco,” she whispered, and Draco’s brain misfired.

She had never once called him by his first name, and the sound of it on her lips lit something inside of him. He felt his heart pounding, and he was unbelievably hard now as he gripped her waist.

“Fuck... say my name again,” he said into her ear.

“Draco,” she groaned.

Draco spun her around so they were facing each other, and he could see she was breathing hard as she stared at him, her breasts heaving above the neckline of her gown. Draco couldn’t stop himself anymore, and he leaned down and caught her lips. Suddenly, his world tilted as she immediately opened her mouth.

He was tasting summer. It made no sense at all because he knew he was outside on a balcony in the dead of winter, but all he could think about was summer. She tasted of warmth and sunlight and that citrusy floral aroma that was all hers, mixed with champagne. The taste of

champagne on her lips reminded him of balmy July nights on the Mediterranean, when he used to sneak wine from his parents and drink it outdoors so they wouldn't catch him. It was a happier time, before he was marked for war, and Draco found himself aching for it. He felt as though he had just been transported to a different time and place with her altogether.

All pretenses of teasing her and taking it slow left him, and Draco was drinking from her like his life depended on it. And maybe it did. She had saved him from loneliness and monotony and a dim future without any meaningful companionship, and now he needed everything she would give him tonight.

He wrenched his lips from hers and frantically kissed back down her neck, toward her breasts, and he suddenly realized she was leaning back against the ledge, offering herself up to him, not unlike those Gryffindors he had chastised all those weeks ago. She wasn't paying any attention at all and might topple over the edge at any moment.

"My room," he said, and he grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward safety and the door, thanking Merlin that his room was very close to this section of the library. She went willingly, and they nearly ran through the stacks as he led them through a side door out into the hallway.

To his surprise and delight, she pressed him against the wall and started kissing him frantically as she fumbled with his tie. He grinned against her mouth, thrilled that she was as eager as he was, and he kissed her back for a moment as she finished with his tie before pulling her along again a bit further down the hallway. He was already unbuttoning his shirt with his free hand as he eyed the door to his room, and the moment he reached it he pushed it open and shut it behind them, muttering a locking and silencing charm. He shrugged out of his coat and shirt and turned toward her again, pressing her against the door as he lavished her with his mouth.

"Fuck, you're so beautiful. And this goddamn dress. It's been driving me mad all night," he said between kisses. "I've wanted to touch you for months. Do this for months. Merlin, ever since I saw you without a bra on that first night at Hogwarts..."

He knew he was saying too much, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. His hands were running over her body now, and he was staring down at the top of the breasts he had been fantasizing about for months, and he couldn't think straight because he might finally get to see them, *taste* them, and he couldn't remember ever being this unfocused with a witch in his life.

"You can touch me," she gasped. "Or kiss me or whatever you want. God, I don't care. I just want you."

With that, Draco needed no further permission, and he quickly found the zipper he had surreptitiously located while they were dancing earlier in the night, and he finally unzipped her dress. She pushed it down impatiently and stepped out of it, and when she straightened up she was just standing there in a pair of knickers and heels and gloves, with the Black family sapphires in her ears and around her wrist. She was bare on top, and it was one of the most exquisite things Draco had ever seen.

Draco thought his heart stopped for a moment, and he stepped back to take in the full picture with wide eyes. “Fuck me, you’re perfect,” he breathed.

The light was dim, but he could see her blushing a bit as he stepped back toward her and raised a hand to one of her breasts reverently.

“You have no idea,” he murmured as he ran a thumb over one nipple. It peaked so beautifully he groaned. “I’ve been thinking about your tits every day. Every single fucking day of the entire term, and what I imagined... gods, they’re even better than that.”

He sensed her lean into him a bit at this, and with her dress gone he could smell it again – that heady scent of her arousal that made him practically lightheaded.

“On the bed darling, I need more of you,” he said, and he stepped back to watch. But before she moved to the bed she used her teeth to loosen her gloves and pull them off, and Draco groaned.

“You’re going to kill me.”

She just smiled a little at this as she turned and walked slowly toward the bed, and now the view of her arse was making his trousers painful. Draco quickly stripped down to his boxers as he watched her kick off her shoes and lay down, and he hurried over to her to run a hand from her neck down and over her breasts.

He could see the heat in her eyes as she stretched out languidly for him, arms over her head, and he thought she might be the most fuckable sight he had ever seen. He couldn’t remember the last time a witch had just laid there for him to stare at her, but he could look at her for hours like this, stroking those tits into perfect little rosebuds. She seemed perfectly content to let him get his fill, and he knew he was the luckiest bloke in Britain. He doubted she had done this for Weasley – they would have been too young and too insecure in their own bodies for this kind of wonton display. And the muggle blokes right after him were just quick shags. Draco sensed she had a deeply sexual side to her that she had never fully explored, and he couldn’t wait to draw it out.

He eventually lowered himself onto the bed next to her, and he kissed down her neck again and captured one nipple in his mouth. She arched and gasped, and Draco’s cock twinged at the sound. The taste of her skin and the sounds she was making were doing something to him, and Draco was practically gluttonous as he sampled her, Savored her. He simply couldn’t get enough. He moved one hand to her wrists over her head to make sure she stayed like that for him, and then he got busy licking and sucking and tasting her, memorizing every sound she made and every jerk of her body. Her body was like a new instrument, and he was learning to play it, to get her to make those perfect notes for him and give him what he craved.

At long last he moved back up to her lips and kissed her there a bit longer before pulling back. She looked totally dazed, but open and ready as he stared down at her.

“Tell me beautiful. Are you wet yet?”

He saw the initial look of shock on her face at his words that quickly darkened to want, and she nodded.

“Words, pretty girl. Use your words. Are you wet for me?”

She shuddered and her eyes fluttered closed for a moment before taking a deep breath. “Yes, Draco. I’m soaking wet.”

Fuck me.

She was so much more sensual than he had ever imagined her to be, and it was doing things to his self control. He swallowed and forced himself to take it slow as he eased his hand down her stomach toward the edge of her knickers and he said, “Do you want my hands, my tongue, or my cock?”

Draco knew what *he* wanted, but he had to make sure. She hadn’t been entirely clear earlier, and as badly as he wanted it, he wasn’t going to cross any lines with her. He sensed it wouldn’t take her long to become amenable to a shag, even if tonight wasn’t his night.

She bit her lip, and Draco nearly groaned as watched her and waited for her answer.

“Can I have all three?” she whispered.

Draco dropped his forehead to hers at this, as his heart started to pound.

She was going to let him do it. He was going to be able to bury his cock into her tight little body like he had been dreaming of for months.

He lifted his head back up and looked at her. “You can have anything you want, whenever you want it, darling. I’m completely smitten, if you can’t tell.”

She gave him a slow, beautiful smile at this. “The feeling is rather mutual,” she said. “I’m absolutely mad for you.”

Draco thought his heart might be bursting, and he was oddly emotional as he leaned down to kiss her again. But he was okay with it. He had listened to Healer Robinson, and he had acknowledged and accepted that he felt this way about her. She had captivated him before he ever got to touch her, and now that they were here, he felt himself falling into her more than ever, and he didn’t want it to stop.

This is part of the journey. This is Joy.

He broke away and looked down at her again. “So all three. In no particular order. Let’s see how many times I can make you come princess.”

She shuddered at his words, and Draco smirked as he moved over her and kissed down her stomach toward the edge of her knickers. He hooked a finger on either side and slid them down, finally getting a good look at her in the low light, totally naked and willing, as he sat back and spread her legs open for him.

“Gods, just look at you,” he said roughly. “Mon coeur.”

To his surprise, her core, which had been glistening a bit, immediately got wetter at his words as he watched. Draco’s own cock was straining his boxers now, and he went ahead and dispensed with them. As he swiftly removed them he continued to stare at what had to be the most perfect cunt he had ever seen in his life. It was so sensitive it responded to his very words, not just his touch. He wondered if he could just talk her into an orgasm.

“So beautiful, so very wet... you’re being so good for me darling,” he said, and he watched her greedily to see if he was right. Sure enough, she arched toward him and made a needy sound that made Draco bite his lip. She was nearly there already, and he hadn’t even touched her yet. He was one lucky bastard indeed.

Draco couldn’t resist any longer. He had to taste her to see if that incredible scent of her translated to taste as well. He lowered his head and kissed up one of her inner thighs, which began quivering in anticipation for him. He did it on the other side as well, but he couldn’t tease her long. He was too desperate for it himself. Finally, he allowed himself the pleasure of one very long lick, as her hips jerked in surprise, and she began to moan.

Fucking yes, he thought, abandoning all teasing as he buried his face into her cunt like he had wanted to do ever since that night at her parents’ house. And Merlin, she tasted as good as she smelled. It was all sex and salt and earth and perfection, and as he licked and sucked and flicked he felt her jerks getting more sporadic, and her moans getting louder as she got closer to the edge for him. He was torn between the addicting taste he was getting and the need to see her orgasm, and finally the desire to watch her won out. Besides, he had promised her his hands to. He lifted his head to watch as he pushed two fingers inside of her roughly and hooked up.

Immediately she groaned, and her eyes rolled back in her head, just as Draco found her clit with his thumb and pressed down hard.

Her eyes flew open at this before rolling back again, “Draco...” she gasped. “Draco, I...” and then she broke for him, and Draco memorized the sight of Hermione Granger shattering around his fingers for the first time, as he rubbed a hard circle into her clit to extend it. She was jerking and twitching as Draco pulled his fingers out before moving to hover over her.

He had to have her now. Seeing how wonderfully responsive and open she was, he was dying to feel it around his cock. He pressed forward into her, and nearly came from the shock of it. She was so narrow and tight. It had been over a year since he had done this with *any* witch, and he couldn’t remember ever being with one who was this readily responsive. He was sure he had never wanted one this badly. He stilled for a moment and dropped his head to her shoulder to breathe. He couldn’t lose control this quickly. He *had* to feel her come around him first, it was absolutely imperative.

He took a deep breath and then pushed further in, and she groaned as he filled her and began to rock.

“Fuck you’re taking me in so good,” he grunted, burying his face into her shoulder again to inhale the citrus and floral scent of her perfume while he felt her enveloping him.

“Yes...” she said a bit incoherently. “Fucking is good... just... just fuck me into the mattress, Draco, *please*.”

Draco thought he must have died and gone to heaven. He could hardly believe her words.

But he certainly wasn't going to say no to that, and he quickly steeled himself so he wouldn't lose control for her before pushing up on his hands. He picked up the pace, and he felt her open even more so he was burying himself balls deep into her as he started to move faster and harder.

“Yes,” she gasped. “God, yes, just like that, please *go*.”

And so he did. He unleashed himself on her, and soon he was pounding her, as those glorious tits bounced with each thrust.

“Grab them,” he said suddenly. “Touch your tits, pretty girl,” and she did and started moaning as she kneaded them and pinched her nipples.

“Fuck...” he breathed as he stared at her, hardly daring to believe what he was seeing. “*Fuck... you are just... goddammit. Come for me, Hermione. Please, I want to feel it, mon coeur.*”

“I am...” she gasped, “I... *Draco...*” and then shattered, and Draco felt her walls spasming all up and down his cock, and Draco felt his own release nearly upon him now. It was only in the last split second that Draco realized he had been so wrapped up in her he had completely forgotten to cast a contraceptive charm. He didn't pause his rhythm to reach for his wand, but he quickly placed his hand on her stomach as she was mid-orgasm, muttered the spell and concentrated with all his might. Her stomach glowed blue just as he jerked and spilled himself inside of her.

He collapsed and reached for his wand to clean them up before he pulled her close to him and threw the covers over them both.

“Stay with me tonight,” he said.

Or forever works too, he thought. But he supposed that was a bit fast.

“Mmmhmm,” she said sleepily. “It's late.”

“I know,” he replied. “Sleep now. Then brunch tomorrow whenever we wake up. And then Palate tomorrow night before I fuck you silly all over again.”

“That all sounds so lovely,” she said dreamily, and Draco could tell she was fading fast. He didn't mind though. He felt her legs twine with his and her head making a pillow out of his chest, and he knew there was no place he would rather be than right here. He forced himself to stay awake long enough to wait her out, and a few minutes later Draco felt her fully relax against him and drift off. He followed her moments later, a sense of bone-deep satisfaction finally lulling him to sleep.

Chapter 13: Brunch

Hermione

Hermione woke up to find herself tangled in a mess of sheets and blankets and naked legs and arms. It took her a moment to realize where she was: naked in bed with Draco Malfoy, who was clinging to her in his sleep like he would never let her go. She had somehow ended up on her back, and Draco was on his stomach right next to her, pulling her tightly to him while his face was buried in her neck. She felt the little puffs of air from his breath, and Hermione smiled at it.

The night before had felt like a dream out of somebody else's life. He had been so wonderful and attentive, and the moment he could break away from the party he had done so to claim her all for himself. She was certain that either they or Harry and Ginny would be making the front page of the papers this morning, but she didn't care. She had been dealing with the press for years, and Draco had too. They would be able to handle whatever the press threw their way since they were doing it together.

She could hardly believe she had kissed him and then slept with him on the same night, but he had been so wonderfully romantic she couldn't help herself.

Besides, she reasoned. I'm twenty-two. And it's not like this was a random hookup.

She knew she probably would have shagged him before he got around to asking her out – she wanted him badly enough to break her own rules about that – but the fact that he *had* made a point to ask her out first had absolutely swept her off her feet, and the decision was practically made for her.

She could still hardly believe it: Draco Malfoy, who had actually won *Witch Weekly's* Most Eligible Bachelor in Britain Award, had chosen her. He wanted to date her. He didn't want to hide it. He was evidently prepared to drop many hundreds of galleons on her tonight given where he was taking her on their first date out in public. And the night before, among all the eligible witches who were practically throwing themselves at him, he had only had eyes for her.

It was nothing short of intoxicating.

So of course she had shagged him. Or rather, she had asked him to fuck her. She could hardly believe she had done that either, but something had come over her, and she couldn't resist. He had looked at her like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he had called her any number of pet names that made her want to give herself over to him fully. It made her feel truly confident in the power of her own body for the first time ever. She had sensed he was capable of giving her a good fucking, and damn if she didn't want to find out what *that* was like.

It was a ten out of ten, she thought happily. He had lost all self-restraint when she asked him to do it, and he had looked like a man possessed as he just took what he wanted from her and sent her spinning into her own climax. Her core and thighs had a delicious ache about them this morning, though she knew she wouldn't say no to round two if he was amenable.

God I'm randier than Lavender Brown in sixth year.

She couldn't help it though. He was all hard angles and smooth planes and masculine strength, and she wanted to wrap herself up in it, soreness be damned. In fact, the little puffs of air he was breathing on her neck in his sleep were already getting her very aroused again.

She shifted ever so slightly, and his hand reflexively gripped her harder as she watched his eyelids flutter open. She could practically see the memories of the night before wash over him as his gray eyes met hers, and his face settled into that trademarked Malfoy smirk. He looked like the cat who got the cream.

Does that mean I can have more of his cream? she wondered. Then she blushed at the crudeness of her thoughts. What on earth was this wizard doing to her?

"Morning," he said as he rolled onto his side and leaned down for a lazy kiss. Hermione couldn't help herself, she opened her mouth to immediately deepen it, and she pressed her breasts into his chest. He had seemed very taken with them the night before, and she rather hoped they would get him worked up for her again. She felt him chuckle as he gave her a deep kiss, his hands skimming her ribcage and down over the flare of her hips. To her delight she felt his touch graze down her front to swipe between her legs.

"Do you always wake up like this?" he asked in a dark voice, and Hermione was pleased to feel him pressing an erection into her upper thigh. "Is this what you do before you get all prim and proper and come to breakfast to read your papers, or is this all for me?"

"You were breathing on my neck in your sleep," she confessed.

"Ah yes," he said knowingly. "You like having your neck touched don't you? I noticed that last night. I can't wait to discover all the things that you like... and maybe find some things you don't even know you like."

Then he dutifully moved toward her neck, and Hermione sighed as she slipped her leg over his hip to pull herself closer to him.

He chuckled again as his hand drifted between her legs to stroke her lightly. "Tell me beautiful, how long has it been since a bloke has touched you like this? Before last night I mean?"

"Maybe a couple years, give or take," she admitted. To her relief he seemed to murmur a sound of approval at this.

"So you've been taking care of yourself for a couple years then? I know you do it. I've smelled it on you before."

Hermione felt her heart start to pound at this. Of course she touched herself, and she had been doing it rather frequently of late. But he could *smell* it on her? She didn't know if she should be mortified or very turned on.

Her body seemed to answer her dilemma for her, because she felt herself get impossibly wet, and based on the way Draco's finger's stilled for just a moment before he resumed his gentle strokes she was certain he had felt it too.

"I... yes," she whispered.

"And what have you been imagining? Or is it just about the sensation for you?" he asked, and he flicked her clit as he said this last bit. Hermione gasped a little.

"I've been imagining..." she started, but he was being awfully distracting, and she wasn't sure how to articulate it. "Hands. Fingers. Bigger ones than mine."

"Whose fingers?" he demanded, and of course Hermione knew there was only one correct answer to this. In any event, it was the truth.

"Yours," she whispered, and he rewarded her truthfulness by suddenly shoving those glorious fingers up into her as he sucked hard on her collarbone.

Hermione made an inelegant sound at the sudden intrusion, but he didn't seem to mind. She wriggled her hips down, desperate for a hint of the fullness she had felt with him the night before. He seemed to sense what she wanted, because he started to move his fingers in and out of her, as he continued to suck.

She felt herself starting to shake, but he didn't let up. If anything he went harder until soon she felt herself cresting over an orgasm with a groan and another gush of wetness. He lifted his head from her collarbone and pushed back from her just a bit as he slowly slipped his fingers out. He smeared it onto her nipples, and Hermione nearly came again at the cold sensation he left behind.

Who was this wizard who seems to know exactly how to turn me on?

Slightly desperate to please him so he wouldn't stop what he was doing to her, Hermione caught his hand and raised it to her lips before slipping his fingers into her mouth to lick them off. He let her do it, his eyes darkening dangerously as he watched, before she guided his hands back to her breasts.

"You're not too sore?" he rasped, as he started to knead them.

She shrugged as she arched toward him. "A bit. But I'm fine. I can take it."

He groaned at this and then leaned down to suck on her nipples a moment before wrenching himself away again.

"Up on your hands and knees then," he said. "I'm dying to fuck you from behind."

Hermione felt herself flush several shades darker. She had only done this a handful of times with one of the muggles she had slept with, but she remembered really enjoying it. Still, she had a sneaking suspicion Draco was about to send her prior experiences into a distant part of her brain.

She untangled her legs from him and rolled onto her stomach. She felt Draco move behind her and yank the covers back to give them clear space. She rose on her hands and knees and waited. And waited. And waited.

She looked behind her to see what was causing the delay, and she saw him just staring at her arse as he stroked himself, much like he had stared at her breasts last night. A bit intrigued, Hermione instinctively widened her stance just a bit and then arched her back. He groaned and furrowed his brow as he continued to stare.

“Just like that,” he finally murmured, as he ran an appreciative hand over her bum. “Merlin, your arse is like a fucking piece of art. And you are soaking wet for me.”

Hermione felt herself become even more stimulated at his words, and she glanced back to see Draco just gaping at her now, with his mouth hanging open slightly. Then he seemed to snap himself out of it because he lined his cock up with her entrance and pushed in without further hesitation. She heard him groan as he entered her.

Hermione herself heard an odd sound rip from her throat at the intrusion. It was so much tighter than the night before, and without even realizing she was doing it she lowered her chest onto the mattress, just keeping her bum in the air for him.

“Oh *fuck*,” he groaned, “Take me just like that princess,” and he started to move in and out of her, and Hermione arched harder so he was now hitting her back wall, and she immediately felt herself start to come apart. The angle was so deep inside of her, and he was starting to move faster and harder, and Hermione was barely conscious of the noises she was making as her body started to twitch and jerk.

“On your stomach,” he grunted, and automatically Hermione obeyed, as she straightened out with Draco still inside of her. He hissed at the new angle that was almost impossibly tight now, before lifting himself up and pushing in with a vigor that Hermione found nothing short of breathtaking.

“*Your. Arse. Is. Fucking. Perfection*,” he grunted between thrusts, and Hermione felt herself shattering all over again, as she moaned right into the mattress.

With another grunt, Hermione felt Draco jerk over her and empty himself into her once more, before pulling out and collapsing next to her. After a few moments he reached for his wand and waved it. Hermione felt the mess disappear as she turned to her side to look at him.

He opened one bleary eye at her and then smiled tiredly.

“Happy New Year,” he said.

Hermione couldn't help it, she started to giggle, and Draco gave her a wolfish grin as he rolled on his side too. He stroked her hip a bit as he looked at her.

"That wasn't too much then?" he asked quietly.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm rather sore now, but you're a potions master aren't you? Whip up something for me before tonight."

He arched one eyebrow at her. She could see he was a little concerned, but also very intrigued by her suggestion.

"I never would have pegged you for being that insatiable," he said. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"I've had a roughly two-year dry spell, and you're rather inspiring," said Hermione.

It was true. He was more demanding in bed than she had been expecting, but she found she liked it. She *really* liked it. He was still very attentive to her needs, and she was surprised to discover she rather craved being guided by him. He clearly knew what he was on about, and while she didn't love to think about his sexual history of sleeping through pureblood circles, she knew it had given him plenty of experience. She was determined to enjoy the benefits of that experience. What was it he had said to her this morning?

"Maybe find some things you don't even know you like."

Hermione quivered in anticipation. She had always loved learning new things.

Draco moved forward and caught her lips, giving her slow deep kisses, which Hermione returned with a sigh. Her body was still thrumming from their wake-up sex, and she felt oddly boneless as she draped herself across Draco's body. Not that he seemed to mind – he appeared perfectly content with the state of the world this morning.

At long last Hermione's stomach rumbled, and Draco pulled back in amusement. "You require food mon coeur."

Hermione felt herself turn a bit pink at this term of endearment, but she just nodded and sat up, finally really looking at the room around her for the first time.

"Good lord, Draco, this is where you sleep?" she asked.

He laughed. "Yes, and it's where *you* slept last night too, in case you're forgetting."

The room was large – not quite as large as the staff bedrooms at Hogwarts, but still much larger than her room at Grimmauld Place or her parents' home. His bed was a handsome four poster, and there was a seating area with a fireplace. He had a large desk overlooking something that appeared to be a miniature quidditch pitch outside. There were a few personal effects on the bookcase: some pictures, a couple of trophies, and inexplicably a snow globe that wouldn't have looked out of place in a muggle holiday shop.

"Erm," she said, "I just realized I don't have any clothes."

He chuckled again. "I had Sully get a bag for you from Grimmauld Place. It's in the room next door. Hang on."

He threw on a pair of joggers and left the room, returning a moment later with a bag. To her consternation he started rummaging through it for her.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked.

"Making mental notes," he said, as he studied a bra and knickers set for a moment with interest.

Hermione huffed. True, most of her underwear leaned more practical than pretty, but it wasn't like that was unusual. And anyway, she liked matching sets. She was more put together in that department than many witches.

He gave her a coy smile and threw them to her, along with a pair of jeans.

"Surely Kreacher didn't forget to pack a shirt," she said dryly.

Draco didn't say anything to this, but instead moved to his dresser and pulled out a jumper and tossed it to her. She unfolded it to find what was unmistakably a Hogwarts uniform jumper from Slytherin House. "Brunch is rather casual," was all he said.

"Seriously?" she asked in amusement, as she held up the jumper. "What will people think?"

"The truth," he said easily. "That we're shagging and sharing clothes. You'll send all the hopefuls downstairs packing if you wear that love. And I can't *wait* to see Potter's face."

He looked practically gleeful as he said this last bit, and Hermione couldn't help herself. She started to laugh too as she pulled it on. It was too big on her, but she rolled the sleeves up and decided she could manage with it. She looked up to find him watching her with a look of utter satisfaction on his face.

"You look good in green," he said.

She just rolled her eyes, but couldn't help the smile that played around her lips as she walked over and grabbed her bag from him. She also found her normal toiletries and some basic jewelry that she swapped out. She checked her hair in a nearby mirror and saw it looked a bit morning-after, as did her make up, but it had held up well enough so she decided to leave it for now. She just pulled the sapphire combs out, and then turned to look at him again. He hadn't taken his eyes off of her while she got dressed, and she colored a bit under his gaze.

"You're gorgeous," he said. "And I want everybody to know you're mine. Come on, let's see if Potter and Ginny are up yet."

Hermione felt a rush of giddiness as she followed him out of the room and down the stairs.

I can't believe we're doing this, she thought.

Draco

The look of shock on Potter's face when he saw Hermione wearing his Slytherin jumper had been just as incredible as Draco had imagined, and he knew he would cherish the memory until his dying day. True, he no longer wished ill of Potter, and they had even seemed to come to some sort of odd understanding the night before. But Draco would never *ever* tire of one-upping him. Getting Potter's best friend to wear Slytherin green was arguably Draco's single greatest achievement to date in his lifelong quest to make Harry Potter squirm.

Draco found himself Savoring again.

Narcissa's day-after brunch spanned several hours, and it was a drop-in affair in the solarium, which had plenty of extra tables and chairs set out for guests, along with a massive buffet that the house elves kept full. When Draco and Hermione walked in, Potter and Ginny were seated at a table on the far side of the room, so Draco made his way over to them to claim some empty chairs before going to fix a plate. On the way he held Hermione's hand and passed Evelyn Rosier, Patricia Higgs, and of course the Greengrasses, all of whom threw looks of pure poison toward Hermione. He was pleased to see she held her head up high and ignored them with an aplomb that would have made Narcissa proud, if her back hadn't been turned. As it was, when Narcissa *did* turn around and spot them, she looked delighted before turning thoughtful, and Draco recognized the familiar expression on her face: it was the same one she always wore whenever she was trying to imagine what a couple's future children would look like.

All in good time, Mother. Calm the fuck down.

Potter and Ginny spotted them at the same time, and Potter got that gobsmacked look on his face that Draco was going to treasure for the rest of his mortal life, while Ginny looked nearly as thrilled as his mother did. He couldn't help but grin to himself as he pulled a chair out for Hermione. "I'll go make a plate for you love," he said. "Do you want the same things you normally eat at Hogwarts?"

She nodded gratefully, and he could see Potter looking even more amazed by the fact that Draco knew Hermione's food preferences so well. Draco just grinned again and dropped a casual kiss on the top of her head and brushed the back of her neck before heading to the buffet. He could see she turned a bit pink by this public display, but she also looked rather pleased, and of course the entire room took note of it. Ginny immediately leaned forward conspiratorially to engage her in conversation, and Draco could have sworn he heard Hermione actually giggle at whatever question Ginny had just asked her.

Draco himself was absolutely delighted. He could tell she was feeling as excited as he was about this new development, and it was amazing to be on the same page as a witch for once. He was determined not to overdo it, but he wanted to shout it from the rooftops that she had agreed to be in a public relationship with him last night. He was discovering he was a rather

affectionate person, at least when it came to her. He craved giving her casual touches, and he was thrilled she was letting him do it.

His mother hurried up to him as he was spooning some eggs onto a plate for her.

“Draco,” she said breathlessly. “Tell me. Are you with Miss Granger then? Officially?”

He nodded and tried to suppress the large smile that broke out on his face, but he couldn’t help it. His mother saw it immediately and nearly squealed with joy.

“Merlin, woman, I didn’t think you would be this excited. I really thought I was going to have to convince you.”

“Oh nonsense Draco, I’ve already told you I care far more about the title than any small trifles around blood. Besides, her alliance with our family will surely convince the world that we regret everything that happened in the war, yes?”

He shot her a look. “I’m not using Hermione like that.”

“No of course not, dear, I’m just speaking in generalities. Some people still have a hard time believing we’re sincere. It doesn’t seem to matter how much money we donate to muggleborn causes, we still have skeptics. The papers have reported the fact that you opened the ball with her of course, though they’re torn about whether it means something or if it was just a publicity stunt. It’s no secret you two work together.”

He rolled his eyes. “The media can bugger off. But I’d wager they’ll get the hint that I’m serious about her soon enough.”

“Oh?” asked his mother curiously.

“I’m taking her to Palate tonight,” he said.

His mother’s eyes widened, and then she beamed. “Excellent, Draco. That’s just the sort of thing.”

“Like I said, I’m not using Hermione for publicity,” he said quietly. “A lot of blokes have tried to do that with her, and it’s the reason she’s so skittish about dating. But I’m also not interested in hiding my relationship with her, so the media will find out in due time. Just let the chips fall where they may on public perception, Mother. I’m not going to risk my relationship with her because she suspects one of us is trying to use her to resurrect the Malfoy name.”

“No, of course not,” said Narcissa quickly. “I won’t say a word.”

“Good,” he said. “Now about Astoria. Why the fuck is she still here?”

“Draco, language,” said his mother primly. He just gave her a stony look.

“As you may have suspected, I allowed the Greengrasses to come because I thought Astoria would probably be her own undoing once she saw Miss Granger. Sure enough, she did all

the work herself last night,” said Narcissa with some satisfaction. “After you disappeared with Miss Granger, she made a scene in the middle of the ballroom. There was shouting, tears, wild declarations that you had broken her heart, all of it. It was so bad security removed her for a time. Once I allowed her back in, the wizards in the ballroom avoided her for the rest of the evening, and even the other young ladies are shunning her. Did you notice that nobody else is sitting with them?”

Draco glanced over and saw his mother was right.

“Good,” he said firmly.

Narcissa nodded. “Yes, sometimes the simplest plans are the best. Though she does appear to be inordinately angry with Miss Granger. You’ll want to keep an eye on her at Hogwarts.”

“I will,” he said. “Minerva is aware, and Hermione herself is no slouch. She was Potter’s dueling partner while he was in the auror academy. She’s practically an auror herself.”

Narcissa’s eyebrows flew up at this. “I had no notion,” she said. “Very well. I’m sure you two will have it in hand then. Now I’ll get out of your hair to join them. I’m thrilled, Draco, utterly thrilled.”

He gave his mother a small smile, as he headed back to the table. As he set the food down, he saw Healer Robinson walk in with his wife. He glanced over at Draco’s table, caught Draco’s eye, and gave him a questioning look. Draco just gave him a small nod and smile, and Healer Robinson grinned broadly and winked at him before heading to the buffet.

Draco decided he was going to send his mind healer an entire crate of Ogden’s finest for helping him bag Hermione Granger.

During brunch Draco had been rather surprised to learn that Potter’s home was under a fidelius charm and even more surprised when Potter told him the address.

“Hermione trusts you,” he said a bit uncomfortably. “And it’s not like you can tell the media where I live.”

Draco supposed that was true enough, but it was still an odd feeling being let into the circle of people who could find Harry Potter’s home.

While he was getting food Hermione had evidently told Ginny where Draco was taking her for dinner, and Ginny had gotten an unusual glint in her eye as she insisted that Hermione come back to Grimmauld Place for the afternoon. Draco rather got the impression Ginny was taking a very personal interest in Hermione’s wardrobe for their big date, so he had let her go after an extended snog with plenty of tongue.

Draco himself had whiled away the afternoon by catching up with Theo and Blaise, who predictably gave Draco hell for the stunt he pulled with Hermione the night before, at least until he told them to shut up about it because they were actually together now.

“Wait, together?” asked Blaise incredulously. “That dance with her wasn't just some sort of publicity thing?”

"No, we're together," said Draco a bit stiffly. "I pulled her away just after and asked her during the fireworks."

Blaise narrowed his eyes. "Did you fuck her too?"

“Unlikely...” chimed in Theo, studying Draco closely. “I mean, she’s Hermione Granger. When has she *ever* been the type to fuck on a first date?”

Draco’s face reflected the truth.

“You *did* fuck her!” said Blaise in amazement. “And you’re actually dating her! Merlin, do you have *any* idea what you’re getting yourself into?”

“I... no. Probably not,” sighed Draco.

Theo gave him a very skeptical look. “Mate, she could probably kick your arse with one arm tied behind her back. Remember when she slapped you in third year?”

“Yeah...” said Draco a bit dreamily.

“Salazar help us,” muttered Blaise. "He’s head over heels for her."

“Well look, when she actually kills you, we'll be sure to make a trip up for your funeral,” declared Theo. “Though I would take it as a personal favor if you could arrange it for a warmer time of year.”

Draco shot him a look and after assuring them he didn’t intend on being murdered by his brand new girlfriend, Blaise allowed him to change the subject. But he could see the wheels spinning in his best friends’ heads before they finally made their exit.

“It’s too fucking cold here,” declared Blaise. “We're headed back to Italy. But come visit us this summer, or anytime. Yes?”

Draco assured them he would, and then he spent the next couple of hours avoiding any other guests and brewing a pain relief potion that he modified a bit to target certain sensitive areas of the female anatomy. As he attached a vial of it to his owl’s leg to send to Hermione, he smirked a little. It occurred to him he could probably come up with an entire line of potions, lotions, gels, and salves that they could use together. It would probably sell very well too, especially with discrete owl delivery. Draco made a mental note to reach out to his company’s marketing team to look into it.

After that had come a review of the papers. Sure enough, he and Hermione had made the front page of *The Daily Prophet*. The article had been mixed, both openly questioning their

motives while obviously curious about the status of their relationship. But overall it wasn't as negative as he had been expecting, and he had to admit the picture of them was fantastic. It had been taken just as he started to waltz with her. He was smiling down at her while she looked practically effervescent in that beautiful gown of hers. He rather wondered if the editors of *The Prophet* had been in two minds about using it. It was such a captivating photo it would surely sell papers, but it also showed them both looking blindingly happy. Draco thought it rather undercut the implications in the article that he was chasing her reputation and she was chasing his money. Based on the photo it looked like they were simply chasing each other.

A couple pages over he found multiple photos of Potter at the party. They included a smaller picture of him and Ginny dancing, as well as a photo of Potter talking to his mother and the moment when they had both shaken hands. Draco was rather surprised he hadn't gotten a howler from Lucius yet based on the contents of the paper, but perhaps his mother had intercepted it for him.

After the papers he had spent the rest of the afternoon with his piano, while he tried to process his unbelievable success from the night before and all the surprising discoveries he had made about Hermione.

She was almost unbearably lovely. He still hadn't gotten a full top to bottom look at her in broad daylight, but he had seen enough now to know that he had no objections whatsoever. He had noticed a few scars and other things witches might call blemishes, but she had fought in a damn war. Absolutely none of it turned him off. If anything it made him feel more protective of her to know she was entrusting her body to him, a former Death Eater, after others like him had succeeded in harming her. It was humbling.

And the extraordinary way she gave her body to him had left him nearly breathless. It had been an incredible surprise to discover that she didn't mind being stared at — in fact, she had unconsciously presented for him each time she noticed him doing it. And then when he took her from behind she practically prostrated herself in front of him and then gave him the most delectable view of arse he had ever seen in his life. It made his thoughts stray toward kinkier and dirtier things, and he rather thought she might be into some of it. He'd only just started to really explore the depths of his own kinks before he went on his voluntary dry spell, but after only two rounds with her he was already thinking about some of those things again. He knew she had much less experience than he did, but she seemed to have a surprisingly strong sex drive, and she gave herself over to him with such beautiful abandon that he sensed she might be open to some experimentation after they learned each other a little more.

He was in a state of disbelief to discover how lucky he was, and he had been half hard all afternoon as he thought about having her again after dinner. He resolved to take her back to his bed at the Manor and have his way with her there. She didn't know it, but she was the first witch he had ever taken to his *own* bed. Sure, he had fucked plenty of other witches, and he had even taken a few in the Manor. But his room was his sanctuary. He had never once crossed the threshold with a witch before last night. He had never wanted to. And in fact, it was the first time he had ever spent the whole night with a witch instead of leaving once the act was over.

He had been so tired he didn't think twice about falling asleep with her, but once he was conscious the next morning he decided it was one of the greatest things he had ever done.

Why had Healer Robinson never told him that waking up like that with somebody you cared about was so incredible? It turned on the intimacy centers of his brain so hard it was practically addictive. Draco had gotten his first hit of it, and now he wanted — no, *needed* — more. Thank Merlin he would be able to keep it up at Hogwarts.

He just hoped that what he could give her tonight would convince her to let him do it again.

He was already hooked and couldn't wait to wake up with her tomorrow too if she would let him.

This was also new for him: this deep need to give to another person so freely. He had always tried to be a considerate lover. He was courteous and conscientious and made sure the witch always came as part of it. He'd always been drawn to the sights and sounds of a witch in orgasm, so getting them off got him off too. But other than that, he had never been a particularly generous person. Sure, he donated plenty of money to worthy causes, but he had enough that he didn't miss it at all. And as far as witches were concerned, he had never dated unless it was an absolute necessity for fucking, and even then he chose impersonal affairs to do it: ministry events, charity galas, other pureblood parties. He had never once taken a witch to dinner because then he would be forced to actually interact with her beyond the initial pleasantries that led to the fucking.

But with Hermione it was different.

He had made intricate plans for the ball and contrived several grand gestures, and now he was *eager* to drop a thousand galleons on dinner and wine for her tonight because the dinner promised to be a long one, and it meant more time to talk to her. And he had caught himself desperately wondering just how long they had to be together before he could start to shower her with gifts. He wanted to give her pretty underthings and sparkly baubles and rare books and turn her room at Hogwarts into a veritable greenhouse of flowers. He had gotten Sully to absolutely grill Kreacher about her, and he had identified a few key pieces of jewelry that were missing in her lineup and now knew that ranunculus were her favorite flowers. Just that morning he had made a note of her bra size, and he was toying with the idea of giving her some new things to wear for him. And the previous night he had mentally assigned the entire transfiguration section of the Malfoy family library to her. Nobody would appreciate those books the same way she would, so they should be hers.

He was suddenly mad to just give, give, give to her. Anything he could give to her — whether it took time or money or affection — he wanted her to have it. He wondered if he should talk to Healer Robinson about this personality transplant he was suddenly experiencing.

And so the day had passed without Hermione physically near him, but she dwelled in his mind all day. And now, as the time drew closer he became more eager than ever to take her out and do things properly. He found he couldn't Savor the time he spent waiting for their date. He just wanted to Savor her.

Draco checked his watch. It was *finally* time to get his witch.

Chapter 14: Dessert Course

Hermione

The moment Draco left her at brunch to make a plate, Ginny had swooped in for details.

“Did he kiss you?”

“Yes,” said Hermione with an uncharacteristic giggle.

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Twice.”

“Oh Merlin, was it as hot as I’m imagining?”

“So hot, Gin, you have no idea,” sighed Hermione.

Ginny practically squealed with delight and then the next round of questions came.

“So are you together? Or just shagging?”

“Together. He’s taking me out tonight.”

“Oooh where?”

“Palate.”

Ginny’s eyes got huge, and Hermione could tell by the look on her face that she was already plotting. Hermione had never been there before and knew that Ginny herself had only been there once, the night Harry proposed.

“I’ll help, Hermione,” she said. “That’s a big deal.”

Hermione felt an enormous amount of affection for her best female friend and her absolute unwavering support. As much as she loved the attention Draco seemed determined to lavish on her, she also felt a bit out of her depth with it. Having some reinforcements would help her navigate these uncharted waters.

Ginny’s solution, naturally, had been to call Fleur for backup. Fleur had also jumped into Project First Real Date with Draco Malfoy with enthusiasm. And so, for the second time in twenty-four hours, Hermione found herself utterly at the mercy of Fleur Delacour Weasley.

After hearing that Hermione had slept with him twice and Draco brewed a special pain potion to help her with the coming night, Fleur nodded firmly. She didn't explain herself, but

dragged Ginny and Hermione to a small shopping area just off of Diagon Alley that Hermione had never noticed before.

“You must know eet ees here,” said Fleur airily, as she led them past several shops displaying delicate nightwear and other pretty things in their windows. Fleur seemed to know exactly where she was going, and sure enough an attractive witch greeted Fleur in French the moment she stepped through the door of one of the shops. Hermione listened as they had a rapid conversation in French, with Fleur gesturing toward her. Hermione caught snatches of the conversation, along with her name and “Malfoy,” and the young woman’s eyes widened for a moment before turning speculative as she studied Hermione’s figure. Hermione noticed she also glanced at Ginny and seemed to recognize her too.

“*Oui*, Madame Weasley, we can help,” she finally said.

“Fleur, what exactly are we doing here?” whispered Hermione as the three witches were led to a dressing room in the back of the shop.

“You must dress to impress,” said Fleur simply. “Eet will give you confidence. Besides, ‘ee is giving you this date, and you should give ‘im something too.”

Hermione gulped. Offering sex as a thank you for a nice date wasn’t something Hermione had ever really done before. But then again, she had never gone on a date as nice as this. And she already had sex with him and planned to do it again tonight. Perhaps Fleur had a point. It might give Hermione more confidence if she was ready for it.

“Does zee young man prefer zee breasts or zee bum?” asked the young witch matter-of-factly.

Hermione blushed. “Erm, he commented on both. And he stared at both. He seems to like to look at me?”

The other three witches assumed identically thoughtful expressions on their faces at this, and not for the first time Hermione realized exactly how inexperienced she was compared to others her age. Her lack of a long-term relationship, combined with her fame, meant she was rather green and definitely out of practice. Even Ginny, who was nearly two years younger than her, was nodding as though the things Hermione was saying about Draco were perfectly natural and expected. Then again, she had been with Harry since the end of the war, and Hermione knew they had a rather robust sex life, though Ginny usually spared her the explicit details.

“And zee dress for tonight?” asked the shop witch.

“I’m loaning her a wrap dress,” chimed in Ginny. “It’s a V-neck but also a bit adjustable up top.”

“Good,” said the shop witch. “Zen we will emphasize zee breasts.”

Hermione watched a bit bemused as she pulled out several things and motioned for Hermione to try them on.

“Erm, with all of you here?” she asked in confusion.

They all just nodded, and Hermione gulped but shrugged as she pulled her shirt off and then turned around to put on the first item. When she turned back the shop girl and Fleur were jabbering in French again as they contemplated Hermione, and Fleur said, “*Non*, eet should be like zis,” and with a frankness that Hermione found a bit shocking she grabbed Hermione by the breasts and pushed them together and up, as everyone studied Hermione in the mirror.

“*Oui*,” agreed the shop witch, “she ‘as zee assets for eet.”

Half an hour later they were leaving the shop, each loaded down with new things to impress their respective partners and Hermione under strict instructions for exactly what she was supposed to wear under her dress tonight.

And now Fleur had her back at Grimmauld Place, styling her hair and doing her makeup again, while Ginny sorted through the stack of jewelry from the night before that they still hadn’t returned to Gringotts.

“Bare neck again Fleur, or should she have a necklace this time?” asked Ginny.

“A necklace,” said Fleur instantly. “Something zat drops toward zee breasts. ‘Ee ‘as already seen zem so ‘ee will be distracted all night if ‘ee sees something touching zem.”

“Merlin you could give lessons on this,” muttered Ginny as she started opening cases to find something that met Fleur’s requirements.

Fleur just smiled serenely. “Eet ees important to make zee young men ‘appy. If you do zat, zey will give you anything.”

Then she turned to address Hermione as she waited for Ginny to find a necklace. “Now, you say ‘ee likes to look, yes?”

Hermione nodded, as she blushed. Fleur just waved her embarrassment off. “If ‘ee likes to look zen you let him look. If ‘ee wants to watch you do things yourself, zen you put on a little show for ‘im. You should not do anything zat makes you uncomfortable, but you must ‘ave zee confidence ‘ermione. ‘Ee would not be taking you to zis place or treating you so well if ‘ee was not very interested in you. So be open to trying something a bit new with ‘im, yes? If you give ‘im what ‘ee wants, ‘ee won’t know what to do with ‘imself. ‘Ee will be desperate for you and will give you whatever you want in return. Bringing a powerful man to ‘is knees ees one of zee best feelings in zee world.”

Seduce Draco Malfoy.

She realized this was what Fleur was encouraging her to do. Hermione was nervous to try it, but she also realized Fleur was absolutely right. He *was* very interested in her. He had given her every indication of that. Hermione had always thought of herself as the bookish one, not the beautiful one. But Draco had already seen quite a bit of her, and he seemed to really like what she had to offer. She had to believe that she was as beautiful as he seemed to think she was to match him in the bedroom. And she had to admit the notion of making him want her

that desperately was incredibly appealing. She just needed the confidence that she could do it.

“How about this?” asked Ginny, as she held up an unusual looking necklace. It was a thin silvery chain that had a round loop with small diamonds on it about a third of the way down. Both ends of the chain were capped with something that looked like large beads covered in the same tiny diamonds as the loop. Fleur studied it critically for a moment and then reached for it. To Hermione’s surprise there was no clasp, but Fleur draped it around her neck and threaded one end through the open loop, which was resting on the center of her chest. The ends dangled down, with the large beads nestled between her breasts.

“*Parfait*,” Fleur declared, and Hermione could see what she meant. The wrap dress had been arranged to show just the slightest bit of cleavage. It wasn’t enough to draw comment from any press who might see them, but hopefully it was enough to get Draco to notice. The necklace seemed to draw the eye downward. Hermione smirked. “Zat ees zee spirit!” said Fleur, seeing the expression on Hermione’s face. “Now, you eat, drink, enjoy, and zen you seduce zee young man and have excellent sex, yes?”

Hermione grinned broadly at this. She had to admit Fleur had really grown on her in the last twenty-four hours.

Just then Kreacher appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Master Draco Malfoy is here for Miss,” he croaked.

Hermione took a deep breath but looked at herself in the mirror and nodded, while Ginny and Fleur gave her an encouraging smile. She slipped on her heels, put on her coat, and then made her way down the stairs to find Draco waiting for her. He turned when he saw her and his eyes widened just a bit before he broke into a broad smile.

“Hermione,” he said, walking toward her. “You’re beautiful.”

Hermione felt herself blush as he leaned in for a kiss, but she sighed a bit contentedly when she felt his lips on hers.

“You’re calling me Hermione then?” she asked as she pulled away.

“You called me Draco all morning.”

Hermione smiled a bit at this. It was true.

“Yes, well you’ve come inside of me twice now. I feel like we should probably be on a first name basis.”

He gave her a large grin at this. “Cheers, love. I always told myself I’d call you by your first name if I was ever allowed to touch you.”

This statement startled Hermione just a bit, but she just gave him a shy smile as he offered his hand.

“Ready then? We can floo directly into the restaurant or we can apparate a block away and walk.”

Hermione’s breath caught at this. They could floo in and probably avoid most of the press if they arrived that way. She hadn’t realized that was an option, and she was grateful he gave it to her. But she realized she really wanted this. She didn’t want to hide it.

“Let’s apparate,” she said. “It’s a mild night.”

He got a gleam in his eye as though he knew exactly what she was thinking, and he caught her hand and led her out the front door to the stoop. A moment later she felt herself being pulled through the darkness before arriving at the apparition point of a very posh area of wizarding London.

“How much of a show do you want to give them?” he asked as she took his arm and he led her toward the restaurant. Hermione could see the flash of bulbs up ahead, indicating the press was already there.

“In for a knut, in for a galleon I say,” she said. “You can kiss me if you want to.”

Hermione felt herself blushing in the darkness, but it was true. She had never sought attention from the press, but she wanted the witches of Britain to know that Draco was off the market. What better way to do it than to give the press a taste of what they wanted?

He’s mine, ladies. Back the hell up.

Draco smirked at her suggestion but didn’t say anything more as they approached. Suddenly, a reporter noticed them, and Hermione forced herself not to blink as a flash of light caught her right in the face.

“Mr. Malfoy! Miss Granger! Are you going on a date tonight?”

“Are you two together?”

“Mr. Malfoy, do you think Miss Granger wants your gold?”

This seemed to trigger Draco because he gave that reporter a fierce look. He shrank back slightly.

“She does not,” he said tersely. “In fact, I rather suspect I have that working against me.”

Hermione was a bit taken aback, but he wasn’t wrong. His wealth *was* something she was a bit uncomfortable with, though she had received a lot of coaching from Ginny about it over the last week. Ginny too was with a very wealthy wizard, and she had learned how to become comfortable with it and just let Harry spoil her over the years, or mostly at any rate. It was one of the reasons Hermione hadn’t really objected to this restaurant. Ginny had started to prime her for this sort of thing before the party.

“Miss Granger, is Mr. Malfoy using you for publicity?”

Now it was Hermione's turn to be outraged.

"Of course not! He gets plenty of his own press. He certainly doesn't need me to draw attention from you lot," she retorted.

"Right you are," chimed in Draco. "Now then, ready for our date darling?" he asked loudly enough for reporters nearby to hear.

"Of course Draco. You were telling me all about it last night. And again this morning of course. I can't wait."

She caught a look of mirth on his face before he leaned down and gave her a searing kiss. Even with her eyes closed Hermione was nearly blinded by the flashes of cameras that exploded to capture the moment. He pulled away, completely ignoring them as he stroked her cheek affectionately. The cameras continued to go off as they caught this gesture too, before he said, "Then let's go in beautiful."

She smiled at him and let him lead her past the press and into the restaurant. Hermione looked around curiously. It was surprisingly small and intimate with maybe a dozen tables in total. They were led to a table in one corner, and Draco took her coat and helped her into a chair before coming around to the other side and finally getting a good look at her. She watched his eyes rove from her face down her neck, following the necklace nestled between her breasts, and she thought she saw him swallow before wrenching his eyes back up to meet hers. She struggled not to smirk and just smiled innocently back as though she didn't know the direction his thoughts had just turned.

Fleur is a genius.

The waiter came and gave Draco a wine list before explaining that the meal was going to be a full twelve courses, prepared as the chef preferred.

"Are there any allergies or things you absolutely won't eat?" asked the waiter.

"No," said Hermione, and Draco looked at her in surprise. "It's true," she added. "I'll try anything."

"But you usually eat the same things at Hogwarts."

She smiled. "Yes, because I have preferences of course. But I'll try anything."

He shrugged and looked at the waiter. "Me too. We'll eat whatever the chef wants to serve then."

The waiter smiled at this and suggested a couple wines for pairing, which Draco ordered.

"I've never done this before, but I've always wanted to," said Hermione. "Lots of courses, excellent chef, no decisions for me to make."

Draco grinned as the first course arrived. To Hermione's surprise, it was a riff on a scotched egg that shocked Hermione with how good it was.

“Good lord,” she said as her eyes widened. “That’s amazing.”

“Not a bad start,” agreed Draco. “Now tell me something I don’t know.”

Hermione thought about this and then suddenly grinned. “Harry learned how to waltz for your party. He was absolutely hopeless until the house elf got involved.”

Draco looked delighted at this piece of news. “Really? He didn’t know how?”

She shook her head. “No, and in fairness to Harry I needed a refresher myself. But I had learned as a child. Harry had a lot of trouble with it at first, but Kreacher was determined he wouldn’t shame the House of Black with subpar waltzing skills. So you can tell your mum that the Blacks are the reason Harry Potter learned how to waltz.”

“Mother will be thrilled,” said Draco as the amuse-bouche arrived, which looked a bit like macaron, but was savory inside and topped with caviar.

“This is amazing, Draco, thank you,” she said as she fingered her necklace.

Immediately Draco’s eyes dropped to it, and he swallowed again.

“Of course. I thought it would be a fun evening.”

Hermione just smiled.

A fun evening indeed.

Draco

Draco was in a sweet state of agony as the meal went on.

It was the best date he had ever been on. Of course it was. He had never been on a *real* date like this before, but it exceeded every expectation. The conversation flowed as easily as the wine. The food was phenomenal. And Hermione was absolutely right that it was fun to see what odd things they would be asked to eat next without second guessing a menu choice. By far the most unusual thing they had eaten so far was pigeon, which was shockingly good and entirely dark meat to boot. Hermione declared it to be the best bit of poultry she had ever tasted, and Draco had to agree. He would never look at those birds the same way again.

But every few minutes his eyes dropped to that tantalizing hint of cleavage, enhanced by the odd necklace she was wearing. She kept playing with it too, and Draco watched over and over as the beads skated across the edge of her breasts before dropping in between them.

And then there was watching her eat. Draco had eaten with her at Hogwarts so many times he thought he knew what he was in for. But it had never occurred to him that he sat *next* to her at Hogwarts. The teachers all sat in a row at the front of the Great Hall so they could keep an eye on the students. Sitting *across* from her was a different experience entirely, and his gaze was fixated on her mouth as he watched her sip wine and eat small bites of food that should not have been as erotic as it was.

Fuck, why does she eat sorbet like that?

He was watching her lick sorbet off a miniature spoon as a palette cleanser, and his cock was twitching uncomfortably.

Draco kept it together through the second main course, which was a beautiful center cut of filet. But then the cheese course came next, and again he was forced to watch those lips wrap themselves around pieces of artisanal cheese, and all he could think about was how he wished it was his cock in her mouth instead.

This should not be so fucking hot.

But it was. Maybe he was truly losing his mind or maybe breaking his dry spell on sex had sent his body into overdrive, but he saw erotic gestures in everything she was doing. By the time they got to the mignardise at the end, Draco was painfully hard and incredibly relieved it was over as he watched her pop the tiny petite four into her mouth.

“Draco, it was delicious. I loved this so much, thank you,” she said.

He gave her a gracious smile and didn’t even look at the bill as he signed it. He just had to get her out of there and into his bed.

“Care to go back to the Manor?” he asked. “I’d love it if you slept over again.”

She looked gratified at this and nodded her assent.

“Good. Let’s take the floo this time. The press has already seen us, and the closest apparition point at the Manor is down the lane.”

Hermione agreed as they moved to the floo, which was discreetly located in a hallway near the loo. “You can floo directly to my room,” he said quietly, and she nodded in relief. He threw some floo powder into it and called, “Malfoy Manor, Draco’s room!” He felt himself spinning away and a few moments later stepped out of it.

Hermione followed right behind him, and as soon as she stepped over the threshold he pulled her in for a deep kiss. She sighed into his mouth and sank into him a bit. Draco felt himself harden as her breasts pressed into his chest, but he also felt something in him settle. It was as though his world turned right to have her like this.

“I’ve wanted to do that all night,” he said as he pulled away.

She smiled, and he saw a lovely blush color her cheeks. “I actually have a little surprise for you,” she said.

Draco was nonplussed, but curious despite himself. “Alright. What is it?”

“Why don’t you go sit down over there, and I’ll show you?” said Hermione, pointing to a comfortable armchair Draco used for reading.

He cast her a questioning look but did as she said, settling back to watch her. She was still standing in front of him. She looked a little nervous, but also determined as she set her coat down and then started to untie a strip of fabric at her waist. Only now did Draco notice that her entire dress was being held together by this one tie.

Thank fuck I didn’t know that in the restaurant or I never would have...

But Draco’s brain suddenly ground to a complete halt because she had just opened her dress and eased it off her shoulders, revealing what she was wearing underneath.

If Draco had known she had been wearing this the entire night he would have canceled dinner and just brought her straight here. He had no idea how long he just stared at her, but she let him do it.

She was in black lace, her luscious breasts being pushed up perilously high by her bra, a hint of her nipples showing through the fabric. Draco’s gaze swept down over her stomach and toward her waist where she was wearing some sort of contraption that looked a bit like a belt, but that had strings hanging down, taught across her hips and thighs and which attached to her stockings to hold them up. The stockings themselves only came as high as her thighs and were edged in lace at the top. Underneath all of it Draco saw a scrap of sheer lace covering her core but that appeared to be ridiculously small and barely there.

Draco continued to drink in the sight and barely noticed that he had opened his trousers and was stroking himself while he looked at her. Evidently he was Savoring, and he was so taken in by her that he didn’t even realize he was doing it. She said nothing but just watched him watch her until he got his fill.

“Turn around and bend over for me,” he said roughly.

She turned slowly and Draco groaned as he saw the scrap of lace covering her core was a thong. There were still two strings attached to her belt that ran over the perfect globes of her arse, but the thong disappeared until she placed her hands against the wall, spread her legs just a bit and bent forward so he could see the thread that ran between them.

“Fuck me...” he muttered as he continued to stroke himself and stare at her. She turned her head around to watch him and stayed that way for several long minutes until she was sure he had memorized the sight of her like that. Then she straightened, and while she still had her back to him, he watched her reach back and unclasp her bra as it fell forward and hit the floor.

Draco groaned again as she turned slowly to face him, her perfect tits finally released for his viewing pleasure. She stood there and reached up to pinch each of her nipples. He knew his eyes were wide as they hardened for him. He couldn’t believe she was actually doing this for him. Then she moved her hands away so they wouldn’t block his view and again gave him a

nice long look, before walking slowly toward him in the chair. When she reached him, Draco reached out and ran a finger over the straps of that curious belt of hers before reaching around her and grabbing her arse roughly. She gasped a little but lowered herself over his lap, straddling him and bringing her tits exactly to the right height for his mouth.

Draco didn't even hesitate. He immediately latched onto one nipple and sucked hard as his eyes closed, and he just allowed himself to taste and smell and feel for a moment. She was moaning and making those breathy gasps he loved so damn much as she arched into him. Draco nipped hard before taking the edge of one breast and sucking hard to mark her. She moaned again at the sensation, and he released her before turning to another area on the other breast and doing the same thing. Over and over again he suctioned his mouth against her, peppering her chest in love bites for him to look at tomorrow. Finally, he pulled her down all the way into his lap, and he groaned as he felt the lace from her knickers brush his open cock.

He kissed her ravenously, hungrily, and she returned his kisses with an enthusiasm that made Draco's heart stand still for a split second. But then his heart sped up again as she leaned toward his ear and whispered, "Let me do something."

Draco nodded, not knowing or caring what she wanted to do as long as it involved her here, mostly naked, with him. She leaned back and deftly unbuttoned his shirt as she kissed down his chest, and he groaned as she used her tongue to lick his scar from sixth year. He knew it was a bit unsightly but she didn't seem to mind at all, and she traced it all the way down his chest and stomach to the point it disappeared into his pants.

She had slid down his lap onto the floor in front of him, and Draco's heart started to pound as she tugged at his pants. He lifted himself off the chair for a moment to help her pull them all the way down before he kicked them off, and she settled between his legs as she studied his cock with interest.

Draco was pretty sure he knew what was coming next, and he could scarcely believe he was about to get this lucky. He mentally steeled himself for it. He was so hard and wanted her so badly that he was afraid he'd go too fast.

I won't come until I'm fucking her. I won't come until I'm fucking her. I won't come until I'm...

"Oh *fuck*," he groaned because those beautiful lips that he had watched eat sorbet and cheese and any number of other things tonight had just closed around his cock. Draco's eyes rolled back, and his head dropped against the chair as he felt her engage her tongue along the head, licking the precum leaking from him before it started to practically dance on the tip.

What the fuck is she doing with her tongue!?

Draco had no clue, but it was swirling and swishing then stopping and then starting again with no discernible pattern or rhythm, and it was making him struggle not to just come into her mouth. Not that he would necessarily be opposed, but he had promised to fuck her silly tonight, and he fully intended to keep that promise. Then the struggle got even harder as he felt her take him in into her throat, and Draco's eyes flew open as he stared down at the sight of Hermione Granger fucking him with her mouth.

“Deep as you can go princess... goddammit...”

To his shock she opened her throat and took him in further.

What the fuck! Doesn't she have a gag reflex?

But evidently she did not or else she had exceptional control over it because his cock was going so far down her throat Draco had no other explanation for how she was managing it. It was sheer perfection, watching her like that, her head bobbing dutifully between his legs as her golden eyes flicked up to watch him. But he felt his balls tightening, and he knew he wasn't going to last much longer like this. As much as he wanted to just release himself down her throat, there was more he wanted to do. He laced his fingers through her hair and slowed her down.

“I want to be able to fuck that pretty cunt of yours too,” he gasped. “You're too good at that darling.”

She blushed at his words but released him and gave him a slow smile as she sat back. He watched as she deftly pulled the straps attached to her belt off of her stockings so they were dangling free, before she stood and unhooked the belt itself. It dropped to the floor, and then she shimmied out of her knickers as Draco watched with rapt attention, his cock twitching for her.

She started to roll down the stockings too but Draco said, “Don't. Leave them just like that. They won't stop me from fucking you, and they're really hot.”

Again she blushed, but she did as he said. “How do you want me?” she asked in a soft voice that made Draco's heart almost stall out.

Gods, but had more wonderful words ever been spoken? Once again she was offering her body up to him, however he wanted it, fully under his direction and control. He thought quickly and decided he was perfectly content where he was.

“Back in my lap mon coeur. I can give you a proper fucking just like this.”

She made a little whimper at this, and Draco was suddenly aware that the dynamic between them had just shifted ever so slightly. With her lips off of his cock, he had regained some self control, and now she was the one panting for it. He studied her for a moment, still standing there just in her stockings and nothing else. He could tell she was desperate for him, exactly how he wanted her. He decided to press his advantage.

“You have to be wet first,” he said as she started to approach him.

She faltered a bit but then flushed as she nodded. She was already wet. Draco knew it because he could smell it. He had gotten her there while he was worshiping at the altar of her tits. But he had also learned that his words worked wonders on her too, and he had another suspicion about her that was growing stronger with each encounter.

“Use your words, mon coeur,” he said. “Are you wet?”

“Yes,” she whispered, as she waited eagerly to see what he would do next.

Oh yes, Draco had a growing suspicion about her: he rather thought she liked to be told what to do. She practically melted for him every time he did it. And while she might be the most capable witch he had ever met, she was also Hermione Granger. She had always loved school and instruction. It wouldn't surprise him if she secretly craved a slightly firmer, more directive hand from her partners. It would probably make her open for him in ways she had never experienced before. And Draco, who was hyperaware of every gasp and gush from her, had missed none of the signals she had given him about this, even though she may not have even realized it herself.

Draco wanted her to come for him so hard she saw stars. He decided to test his theory about her.

“Then show me, pretty girl. I want you absolutely dripping for me. Use your fingers and let me see you check.”

At this her jaw dropped and her pupils blew out for him, but he just gave her a small smirk as he waited. She took a shaky breath but then dropped her hand between her legs, and Draco watched avidly as she swiped a couple fingers across her slit and then nodded.

“Words,” he said gently.

“I... yes,” she shuddered. “I'm very wet... for you.”

“Good girl,” he said, and once again she started to melt for him.

“Now lick it all off for me. Get those fingers nice and clean.”

She didn't hesitate this time, but popped both fingers into her mouth, and her eyes rolled back as she did it.

Fuck me, this is one of the hottest things I've ever seen.

“Get on my cock now,” he said suddenly. “I want to feel you come all over it.”

She opened her eyes and eagerly moved forward as she straddled him again and sank all the way down. Draco hissed, and she moaned at the sudden intrusion. Draco kissed her as he gave her just the briefest moment to adjust, but as soon as he felt her walls relax and his full length inside of her, he pulled back and surged up hard.

Hermione gasped, as she threw her head back, and Draco pumped his hips up aggressively into her. He sensed something in her snap, and she started to go wild as her tits bounced, her thighs clenched, and she got into a similar rhythm as him.

“Draco,” she gasped. “I want... I need...”

“Take anything you want from me, beautiful,” he said through gritted teeth. “I want to give you whatever you want.”

To his surprise she said, “I want pressure,” and Draco stopped his thrusting for a moment but pressed up into her as he felt her bear down on him and start to grind. He held her hips to help steady her as she let loose, seeking some deep, consistent pressure from him as she swirled his tip over the back of her channel.

Draco was nearly lost as he felt it, so deep and so hard, the sensitive head of cock going back and forth over some small ridge of something she had inside of her that was driving Draco insane.

“Draco, I’m gonna...” she started, and Draco once again felt that unfamiliar shock of hearing his first name. It slipped off her tongue like a prayer as she found herself on the very precipice of her orgasm.

“Go harder darling. Let me feel you come all around me.”

She gasped as she did what he said, and then she broke, her body convulsing and her walls contracting as Draco felt her orgasm rip through her. She nearly collapsed on top of him, but Draco wasn’t done yet. He knew from experience that witches who orgasmed as hard as Hermione had just done could often go again if he caught the moment and rode it.

He physically lifted her off of him and then stood too as he bent her over the chair.

“Brace yourself on the chair love, you’re going to give me another,” he said, as he slotted into her from behind.

She made an incoherent noise, but Draco just pushed into her and immediately started to thrust, taking advantage of the aftershocks from the orgasm she had just had. The second should come faster, and sure enough, it wasn’t long before her knees gave out, and she was collapsing into the chair. Draco didn’t let up though. He continued to drill her until she came for him a second time, his name bursting from her lips once again.

He pulled out and saw she was starting to relax into the chair. Draco reached over to her and lifted her up to carry her bridal style to the bed. Her head nestled into his chest, and he felt a rush of possessiveness and an odd tenderness suddenly wash over him at the gesture. It was like she was trying to bury herself into his heart, and the trust he felt from her in that moment made him oddly emotional.

He set her down gently, and she opened her eyes to stare at him blearily.

“You’re so beautiful like this,” he said, as he ran a hand over her body. She was fully relaxed now, splayed out for him like a piece of art, totally open as she let him stroke her. “You’re all mine. And now I want you to come one more time for me.”

She looked a little uncertain at this.

“You can do it,” he assured her gently. “Just lay here like this. You let me fuck you so well just a few minutes ago. Now let me take care of you. You’ll be there again before you know it.”

She just nodded and closed her eyes as Draco settled over her and dropped his head to taste her. He gave her long, lazy kisses as he worked down her stomach and toward her core. He was determined to give this to her: a soft orgasm, a gentle one that she wouldn't have to work for at all. He would do all of the work for her, because she had been so lovely tonight, so surprising. He wanted her to just enjoy it and feel. And he was sure to send himself into his own pleasure while he did it. Her soft supplication turned him on like nothing he had ever experienced before.

"Let me see you," he whispered, as he opened her legs and looked down once more at her glistening folds. "You're still so perfectly wet for me aren't you? Even after all that?"

She just nodded.

"Words darling. You don't have to do anything at all except come for me, but I want to hear you use your words."

"Yes," she said with a sigh. "I'm still so wet. All yours."

Gods she's amazing.

"It's perfect. You're perfect," he said, and remarkably the glisten got stronger as she responded once more to the things he said to her.

Draco just marveled at her as he settled down for a lazy feast. This was his real dessert: her perfect, soaking wet cunt that she had just told him was all his. He took his time, licking every drop off of her before penetrating her with his tongue. She was starting to gasp again and wriggle her hips, but Draco held her in place. Like everything else tonight he was determined to get his fill of her. He was Savoring, dammit, and he refused to be rushed. He spent several more minutes down there until she was pleading with him.

"Draco... please... I want you. I need you inside of me."

Again, Draco felt a jolt of pleasure at the words that had slipped off her tongue. Somehow he knew, deep down, that she had *never* said that to another man, because no other man had taken her to these places before. No other man had studied her enough to pick up on the things she really wanted. He might not be her first lover, but he was surely the first one who matched her like this. He felt a mixture of affection and desire as he considered it. He had held back his own pleasure for so long tonight, and he was dying for his own release.

Draco lined himself up with her entrance to give her what she asked for, as he suddenly realized he had been shagging her all night without the contraceptive charm in place. He just shook his head at his own stupidity. Despite his mother's insistence that magical pregnancies took time, he knew Hermione could get pregnant before he ever came inside of her just from precum. While Hermione was right that sex education at Hogwarts was nonexistent, Lucius had taken a rather firm hand in Draco's own education about it due to the fact that Draco would need to secure a legitimate heir someday. And the importance of casting the contraceptive charm early so he didn't father a child out of wedlock was one of the few things Lucius had absolutely drilled into him from the age of thirteen.

There was nothing for it though. Clearly he would have to get Hermione on the potion and just trust her to take it, because unlike the charm it could last more than twelve hours. At his father's behest, Draco had *never* trusted a witch to tell him the truth about the potion, but at this point he no longer trusted himself to remember the charm when he was with her. He had never been so taken in by a witch before that he forgot to cast the charm well in advance of any penetration, but he was so wrapped up in Hermione he had forgotten every single time.

He placed his hand on her stomach and muttered the spell. Her stomach glowed blue as he sheathed himself into her with a groan of relief. He needed her so badly. He wouldn't be able to hold back again once he saw her come one final time.

He moved in her with steady, sure strokes, while he kissed her deeply. He felt her starting to crest for the third time as he moved to her neck and lavished her there.

"You can do it, princess," he coaxed in her ear. "I know you can give me one more."

He picked up the pace for her ever so slightly, and she gasped and started to shake. Before long she was careening over the edge, and he pulled back a bit to watch her face as she did it. Her expression was enraptured, and the feel of her orgasm around his cock was enough to pull him there too.

"So. Fucking. Perfect," he gasped as he pumped into her.

He felt himself collapse on top of her, and he forced himself to expend the last bit of energy he had to roll off of her and reach for his wand to clean them up.

He felt her roll over on her side and nestle into him, and his arm pulled her to him automatically, stroking her lightly.

"Stay with me tonight?" he asked.

"I'll always stay with you Draco," she said with a sleepy yawn.

Despite his exhaustion his heart leapt.

Always sounds perfect to me.

Chapter 15: Second SWOT

Hermione

For the second morning in a row, Hermione woke up to a naked Draco Malfoy wrapped around her. This time she had her back to him, and he was spooning her so hard she felt the entire line of his body down her backside. The hand that was pulling her to him was rather relaxed in sleep, but he had also found one of her breasts unconsciously, and he was using it to hold her against him. She just smiled to herself. Who ever would have guessed that Draco Malfoy was such a sleepy snuggler?

Hermione had to admit that this was the thing she had missed most after breaking up with Ron. He didn't latch onto her in his sleep the way Draco did, and they had a tendency to wake up on their respective sides of the bed the few times they had spent the night together. But she had still very much enjoyed having a male presence next to her at night, and she craved the intimacy of it the following morning. She hadn't even realized how much she missed it until Draco had suddenly brought it back into her life with an enthusiasm that made her melt.

Hermione hoped he would continue to do this with her at Hogwarts. She had studied the handbook as soon as she admitted to herself that she really fancied him, and there were no rules prohibiting this sort of thing, as long as the Headmistress was made aware. Hermione knew the other staff members might look at them a bit askance if they saw them go in and out of each other's rooms, but then again, she was sure that after their round with the press last night it wouldn't be a secret. And she didn't know if she could stand to sleep separately from him, now that she had woken up with him two mornings in a row.

The night before had absolutely blown her away, both in the quality of the date and then in the quality of the sex following the date. Hermione had been nervous to show him the surprise Fleur had arranged, but the minute her dress opened the look on his face turned so feral Hermione felt enough confidence that allowed her to just stand there and give him exactly what she knew he wanted.

She had watched him study her and then pull his cock out to stroke himself while he did it, and Hermione had felt nothing short of powerful. And then when she went down on him, using all the techniques she had read about in her magazines over the years, she truly had him at her mercy. It had emboldened her.

But then he turned the tables on her and took over, and Hermione had become more turned on than she could ever remember being in her life.

She couldn't really put her finger on it – she wasn't certain *why* the words he used and the things he told her to do made her brain just shut off. But they did, and she knew he had sensed it and used it to make her utterly weak for him. She found she didn't really mind though. She wasn't a weak person in general. Their banter at dinner the previous night had

proven that to her. Despite the fact that she had slept with him and was mad for him, she could still go toe to toe with him intellectually. It was only when she was practically naked and he was telling her to touch herself or come around his cock that she totally lost her head.

In a rare moment of self-awareness, she decided not to attempt to rationalize it. There was no question it turned her on in ways she had never experienced before in her life, and Draco seemed to relish it too. She assured herself that there wasn't anything wrong with it if they were both enjoying it, and it had made their coupling through her first two orgasms the previous night practically explosive.

The third orgasm had been yet another surprise. She didn't think she could go a third time because she was so exhausted from the first two, but Draco took control and coaxed it out of her with a sweetness that made her heart ache. Unlike the first two times she got the sense that he was almost worshiping her body through it. He did it so slowly and ardently it almost felt more like making love than having sex.

Let me take care of you, he had said. And goodness but he had. Hermione had never felt so cared for in her life than when she was under his capable hands and lips that third time. He hadn't asked her to do anything at all except use her words and come. She had just laid there, relishing the feeling of him as he brought her to that special place so gracefully she fell over the edge without even realizing it.

Fleur was right.

Fleur, who evidently knew more about men than any of Hermione's other friends or acquaintances, had told her this would happen. If Hermione gave him what he wanted then he would hardly know what to do with himself, and he would be eager to return the favor tenfold. Seeing any wizard want her that badly and then express himself in the way Draco had the previous night was surely the best feeling in the world.

Hermione wasn't exactly sure what it all meant, but she knew that this wizard sleeping behind her was pulling something out of her emotionally that she had never really explored before. Thank Merlin this wasn't just about sex for him, because if it had been then *she* would have been the one crying in the loo at Hogwarts. As it was though, she sensed he was rather enamored with her and that's why everything he had done with her had been so perfect. Hermione only hoped the honeymoon period wouldn't fade too quickly.

She felt him stir and his hand tighten around her breast.

"Can we always wake up this way?" he asked in a gravelly voice as he tweaked her nipple, and Hermione's heart sang.

I guess he wants to do this at Hogwarts too.

"I would be amenable to that," she said lightly, and she sensed, rather than saw, him smile into her neck as he started to kiss her again.

"I never thanked you properly for your present last night," he murmured. "That was the hottest thing I've ever seen. Thank fuck I didn't know about it during dinner or I never

would have made it past the second course.”

“I rather think you did thank me,” she said in amusement. “You were quite... enthusiastic after you saw it.”

“Mmmm,” he said in agreement. “Speaking of enthusiasm, we need to get you on the potion, love. I barely remembered the charm the last few times. You’re far too distracting once you’re naked.”

Hermione’s heart thudded at this, as she realized he was absolutely correct. It would be harder for her to have children than the average witch, but certainly not impossible. And she hadn’t been careful at all.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I’ll start a round when we get to Hogwarts.”

“I’ll brew it for you,” he said. “I don’t know that I like the stuff Poppy hands out. Too many bad side effects. And I’ll make it taste good.”

Hermione just nodded. She trusted him to do it the right way. With his title and money, she knew he had far more incentive than she did to make sure it was done right.

She rolled over toward him and saw he looked incredibly relieved that she had agreed to take the potion he brewed so readily. There was the tiniest part of Hermione’s heart that was suddenly hurt by this, but she made herself think through it clearly. They had only been dating for a couple days. She was only twenty-two, and she was barely into her career. Of *course* she didn’t want kids yet. She shouldn’t take it personally that he didn’t either, and in fact she should take it as a good sign that he apparently trusted her to handle it with the potion when he had never trusted another witch with it. She should be gratified that she distracted him so much that he barely remembered the charm, and Hermione herself certainly hadn’t remembered to do it either. She forced that tiniest twinge of hurt away and made herself smile at him. He smiled back and kissed her.

“Ready for some breakfast then? We have to go back to Hogwarts today and face the music with Minerva. We should fortify ourselves.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at this. “Your mother won’t mind it if she finds me here a second morning in a row?”

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. “I don’t want to scare you off love, but my mother is already scheming to make sure this thing between us turns fairly permanent. I can assure you, she will be *thrilled* if you show up for breakfast. I’m certain that she’s hoping you’re in the Manor right now, and the only reason she isn’t beating down my door to find out is because she doesn’t want to send you running if you happen to be here.”

Hermione felt a genuine smile break out now. *Turns fairly permanent*. Hermione’s heart fluttered at this and the casual way in which he mentioned it to her.

“Alright then, breakfast. And maybe we can swing by the library again before heading back to Hogwarts. I agree we’ll need to talk to Minerva today, but I can handle her. We don’t

have to rush back.”

He nodded with satisfaction as he gave her one final kiss on the nose. “Pick something from the library you think she’d like too. A bribe never hurts.”

Hermione was amused. “I really don’t think she’ll mind,” she said. “She told me she’s been wondering about it ever since we were in school.”

Draco gave her a surprised look, but then turned thoughtful. “She’s not entirely wrong. I did wank to thoughts of you while we were in school together now and then.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “Never say so.”

“Oh I did,” he said easily. “It was one of those things I wouldn’t admit to anybody. You were supposed to be forbidden, but you were also really hot. Sometimes I couldn’t help myself.”

“Well Minerva must have suspected,” said Hermione, feeling both amused and incredibly warmed by this unexpected confession.

“Still, a bribe wouldn’t be bad,” retorted Draco. “I don’t want there to be any barriers to sleeping with you at night once we’re there.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at him but smiled. “Fine, I’ll find something she might like. But let me try reasoning with her first. I really don’t think she’s going to try to stop us.”

Draco inclined his head. “I’ll admit, the fact that you’re her favorite is exceptionally helpful.”

“I’m not her favorite,” said Hermione, as she slipped her dress from the night before back on. Draco’s eyes darkened a bit as he watched her tie it.

“Of course you are,” he said easily. “And I understand it. You’re certainly my favorite member of staff.”

She just shook her head at him, but he gave her a boyish smile as he threw on some clothes before leading her downstairs.

“Breakfast is in the breakfast room,” he said.

“Oh of course,” said Hermione, as he led her to a small, but bright room with a table for eight in the middle and a sideboard brimming with food.

“Draco! Miss Granger!” said Narcissa with delight as she put down the paper she was holding.

“Mother,” said Draco, walking around to give her a kiss on the cheek.

Hermione just gave her a shy smile, but Narcissa beamed at her. Evidently Draco was correct. “Good morning, Lady Malfoy,” she said.

“Oh you must call me Narcissa, dear,” she insisted as Draco helped her into a chair.

Hermione inclined her head. “Then please call me Hermione, though I understand if it takes a little practice. Draco only just started doing it a couple nights ago himself.”

Narcissa and Hermione both cast amused looks at Draco, who rolled his eyes as he put together plates for both of them.

“How was Palate, dear?” asked Narcissa kindly. “It’s been an age since I’ve been there.”

“Oh it was wonderful,” said Hermione, and she felt herself lighting up as she told Narcissa all about it. She saw Draco looked very pleased by how enthusiastic she was.

“And did our date make the papers?” he asked his mother as he set a plate in front of Hermione and settled in next to her.

“See for yourselves,” Narcissa smirked as she passed *The Daily Prophet* across the table to them.

Hermione and Draco leaned in to read together.

Draco Malfoy Off the Market!

by Rita Skeeter

The rumors are true! That thing you just heard is the sound of hearts breaking all over England as Draco Malfoy, heir to the Malfoy fortune and 2000 winner of Witch Weekly's Most Eligible Bachelor Award is officially off the market. The lucky witch in question is none other than Hermione Granger, the famed “Golden Girl,” who has previously been connected with Viktor Krum, Ronald Weasley, and of course Harry Potter.

As we have previously reported, Mr. Malfoy opened the annual Malfoy New Year’s Eve Ball by dancing with Miss Granger. While it surprised the society witches there was speculation that it was nothing serious. After all, Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger are colleagues and work together at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. But over the last twenty-four hours our investigative team has done some digging, and we can exclusively report that the relationship is real, and they have been together for some time.

The night of the party, Miss Granger wore sapphires from the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, which we can now report were last seen in public when worn by Walburga Black in September of 1985 (see included photo). It is well known that Mr. Malfoy is the heir to the Black fortune through his mother Lady Narcissa Malfoy, and he presented Miss Granger with the gems as a means of making their relationship public.

“I recognized those sapphires right away,” said Gladys Derwent, who attended the Malfoy party on New Year’s Eve. “Walburga and I were old friends, and I was shocked to see them on a muggleborn witch. But I suppose that times change. Draco must be head over heels for her.”

Head over heels indeed.

Following the public revelation of their relationship, Mr. Malfoy took Miss Granger on a date to Palate for their famed New Year's Day tasting menu. We can exclusively report that Miss Granger is the first witch Mr. Malfoy has ever taken to this restaurant, which is known to be one of the best in England. As always, reservations for Palate's New Year's Day tasting menu disappeared within hours of being released in mid-November. Speculation is rife that the couple's relationship may have started weeks ago under the cover of Hogwarts. When asked about it, Headmistress Minerva McGonagall declined to comment, though she did confirm that both parties are members of the staff.

"Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy are both respected teachers and masters in their chosen fields of study. Hogwarts has never commented on the personal lives of its staff, and we won't be starting now."

It is certain that the young ladies of Hogwarts in particular will be watching their relationship closely. Will the happy couple survive Mr. Malfoy's rather sordid past? Or will Miss Granger's propensity to break fragile male hearts emerge and leave Mr. Malfoy as emotionally wrecked as her previous boyfriends? Only time will tell, but it can be certain that if Miss Granger does not become the next Lady Malfoy, there will be plenty of witches ready and willing to step in and take her place.

And there, above the article was a large picture of Draco kissing her before pulling back and stroking her cheek. Hermione smiled up at him shyly while Draco beamed at her. It was a lovely picture, and Hermione was sure that it would confirm everything the article had said about them for most readers. Of course, she and her closest friends knew the truth: their relationship was less than forty-eight hours old.

"Gone off on me a bit at the end there, hasn't she?" asked Hermione lightly, as Draco smirked at her.

"Just give me some warning if you plan to break my fragile male heart like you broke Potter's," he said.

Hermione snorted. "What a load of tosh. Honestly, I went to a school dance with Viktor Krum when I was fifteen, and I have a couple of male best friends. According to Rita I've been a scarlet woman ever since the Yule Ball. But no matter. Eventually Rita will find out that Harry and Ginny are engaged and Ron and Lavender are about to be, and that will draw her attention away from us."

Narcissa's eyes were huge. "Harry Potter's engaged?"

Hermione nodded. "They're keeping it quiet. They're hoping to break the news in *The Quibbler* once they're married, though the wedding isn't going to be until this summer. I'm not sure they'll really be able to keep it to themselves that long. They're going to wait as long as possible before sending invitations, but last I heard the wedding is going to be fairly large. *Somebody* is bound to crack and tell the media about it first."

Narcissa sat back, looking thoughtful. "I did wonder," she murmured. "Ginny wore the Potter diamonds to the ball. The last time I saw that necklace was at Lily and James's engagement party. It made a pretty strong statement that Harry gave it to her to wear.

Hermione was surprised and a bit taken aback that Narcissa had been to Lily and James's engagement party, but then again, James was a pureblood. Narcissa was Sirius's first cousin. The families must have known each other.

Hermione just shrugged. "He didn't, really. I mean, I suppose he did, in a manner of speaking. He let Ginny into his vault, and she just pulled out every piece of jewelry she could find. We both winged it while we were getting ready though. Harry had no idea what she was going to wear, nor me."

Narcissa looked very amused now. "Oh Merlin," she laughed. "You may want to warn them both that wearing gems like that is usually done to announce intentions, so if they want to keep their engagement quiet they should wait until they're married before she wears them again. It wasn't terribly surprising to see her in them because everyone knows they are together, but it did set a lot of the older tongues wagging about the inevitable wedding date."

Hermione gulped. "And that jewelry I wore..."

Narcissa waved her off. "Interpreted exactly like the paper reported. Everyone thinks Draco sent it to you. Of course, the statement isn't quite as strong as Ginny's since they're Black sapphires and not Malfoy ones. And you didn't wear the necklace, which is really the most famous piece from the set. But as soon as I saw them I rather thought that Rita would pick up on it eventually."

To Hermione's surprise, both Narcissa and Draco looked remarkably satisfied by this.

"Err, sorry?" Hermione said questioningly.

"Not at all," said Draco. "I thought it was perfect. Just don't wear anything too distinctive from Potter's collection. Stick to the Black or Malfoy collections."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at this. "I highly doubt Harry knows which pieces belong to which," she said slowly. "Although..." she thought about it for a moment. "Kreacher might know."

"He certainly would," said Narcissa. "And Draco's right. As long as you don't wear anything that is obviously Harry's, it won't mix up the story. Black and Malfoy only my dear, until further notice."

Hermione felt herself blush, but neither Draco nor Narcissa seemed perturbed by this at all. Not for the first time, Hermione felt a bit out of her depth. But she resolved to write to Ginny to make sure the jewelry got sorted correctly and to let her know that the entire pureblood world now thought she was engaged based on a bloody necklace.

I clearly have no idea what I'm doing.

Reasoning with herself that it wasn't likely she would need jewelry like that for at least another year, Hermione tried to put it behind her.

"A couple hours for the library love, then we need to head back to Hogwarts," said Draco. "I'll have Sully collect your things from Grimmauld Place."

"Oh, I promised Ginny I would come by and let her know how it went last night. She... helped me get ready."

Draco's eyebrows flew up at this, but then he got an unholy gleam in his eye. "Why don't you ask her to come over here then? You can show her the library, and that way you won't run out of time."

Hermione was a bit taken aback by this, but nodded agreeably as she rose, and Draco called for Sully to fetch Ginny.

"Off to the library then, I suppose," she said. Draco just swept the door open for her with a curious look on his face.

What is he up to now?

Draco

Draco told himself it wasn't *that* big of a deal to eavesdrop on his girlfriend and one of her best friends as they gossiped about the date he had taken her on the night before. After all, it was her friend's own brother who had invented the extra long, clear extendable ear Draco had strategically placed in the transfiguration section of the library as Hermione went to freshen up in his room before Ginny arrived.

Besides, he was sure that this way he would get an unbiased review. He wanted to do another SWOT analysis, this time to make sure he improved his dating skills.

"Ok Hermione, tell me *everything*. Dinner was obviously fabulous, yes?"

"Oh yeah, I've never done anything like it. I felt totally spoiled."

Draco smiled with satisfaction at this. Mission accomplished.

"And the sex? Did you show him what you bought at that shop?"

He heard a feminine giggle. "Oh you should have seen his face, Gin. Fleur was absolutely right. It was perfect."

Wait, Fleur? As in Fleur Delacour?

Draco knew Fleur had married the oldest Weasley brother, but he had no idea she and Hermione ever spent time together.

“Well you did look really hot in it,” said Ginny. “It did amazing things for your boobs.”

Draco’s mouth dropped. *Ginny had seen her in it?*

A very odd sensation came over Draco as he contemplated this.

“It’s *Fleur* who did amazing things for my boobs. I still can’t believe she just grabbed them and smooshed them together like that.”

Draco’s cock was standing at attention now, as he hardly dared to breathe.

“Yes, well, she’s French. That sort of thing doesn’t phase her at all, and she was right. Your boobs were made to be pushed up. Anyway, you know she’s all about ‘pleasing zee young men.’ She actually gave me lessons after she figured out I was sleeping with Harry. That’s how I learned to suck him off so well. I can do it in under a minute if I want to.”

Draco was gaping now, over in the charms section. This was unquestionably the most fascinating conversation he had ever heard.

Hermione laughed. “Maybe I should owl her for tips because Draco likes that too. I did the alphabet trick on him last night,” she said.

What the fuck is the alphabet trick?

Ginny laughed too. “Just the alphabet? Knowing you, I’d guess you spelled something.”

“Fine, I wrote ‘Make me come,’ with my tongue. He seemed to get the message loud and clear.”

Oh. Ooooooh. Fuck me now please.

“How many times then?”

“Three. Maybe more. One of them sort of crashed into another and then another, and I kind of lost count.”

Draco wanted to punch the air with his success. He knew she had had at least three, but damn he had hoped some of those aftershocks counted too.

“So that’s why you’re so happy today,” teased Ginny. “Do I need to get you a potion now?”

He heard Hermione snort at this. “Draco’s going to handle it. Not that I’m likely to need it any time soon, but I suppose it’s possible.”

“It’s definitely possible,” said Ginny firmly. “Ignore all the shit my darling brother said to you about it. Wizarding anatomy has never been his strong suit.”

Draco furrowed his brow at this a little.

Hermione snorted again. “True. He never did find my clit.”

“Oh ewww!” squealed Ginny, and now Draco was grinning again, feeling very satisfied with himself indeed.

“I’m sure he’s found Lavender’s by now. She would have made a point to show him eventually.”

“Ugh ok seriously! We aren’t talking about *Ron’s* lovemaking. That’s the best thing about Draco in my opinion – he’s not one of my brothers, so I’m free to imagine him doing all the things!”

He heard Hermione laugh at this. “Well he certainly has done plenty of things... though I’m still waiting for him to tell me his big secret.”

Draco perked up at this. *Big secret?*

“Don’t you mean *your* big secret?” teased Ginny. “You’re the one who spied on him the entire term.”

Draco’s heart started to thud a little. *Spying on me?* Granted, he was spying on her at the moment, but it was the first time. He just wanted to find out how he had done the previous night.

“I didn’t *spy*. I told you I saw him go to the Room of Requirement on the map the first week of term. It’s not my fault he’s never noticed the cat in the corner of the room.”

Draco was listening with rapt attention. He didn’t know what she meant by the map or the cat, but he definitely knew what was in the Room of Requirement. Surely not...

“Yes and you kept following him after that first night. Because he’s so talented...”

“He *is* talented! Honestly, he’s like a bloody concert pianist! And nobody but me seems to know it! Besides, once I started requesting muggle music from the room it got really hot. He can sing too.”

Why you little minx, thought Draco, though he wasn’t angry with her in the least. He realized he was grinning broadly on the other end of the extendable ear. Who knew that Hermione’s other “player” was really Hermione herself.

“Does he really?” asked Ginny curiously.

“Yes,” Hermione sighed. “That first night... I swear to God Gin, it turned me on so much I would have had an orgasm right there if I hadn’t been a cat. Turns out cats can’t do that the same way humans can.”

And what’s this about being a cat?

“You know, your ability to orgasm or not while in your animagus form is not something I can ever say I wondered about,” said Ginny with amusement.

Holy fuck she’s a bloody animagus.

She was a cat animagus, just like McGonagall. And he had never heard about this. She must be keeping it as a surprise for her students until they got to that lesson in the next term. Until they knew about it she would be able to prowl around the castle unnoticed. And even once they knew about it she would be hard to detect. After all, she had been hiding in the Room of Requirement to listen to him play for months, and *he* hadn’t noticed. *Why that sneaky little...*

“Well me neither, until I got really turned on and realized I couldn’t do it. I wish he would just tell me that he plays so I could hear him in my human form. Merlin knows that would get me going.”

It’s a date, love.

“Are you going to confess your sins to him when he finally does?”

“Perhaps,” she said in an amused voice. “Relationships are built on honesty, yes? And I can honestly say that it’s the thing that made me fall for him. I had been attracted to him for awhile, but after that first night with the muggle music... I was done for.”

Draco couldn’t help but smile broadly at this. *She’d fallen for him.*

“And the fancy parties and lovely dates and hot sex certainly don’t hurt,” added Ginny.

“No they don’t,” said Hermione. “Speaking of which, Narcissa told me that necklace you wore was interpreted among the old pureblood crowd as a statement of intent from Harry. Evidently it’s a very well-known piece. So everyone knows Harry is serious about you, and now everyone thinks Draco is serious about me because the jewelry I wore was from the Blacks, and Narcissa is a Black. They don’t realize Harry inherited it from Sirius.”

“Draco *is* serious about you,” insisted Ginny.

Damn right, thought Draco. His seriousness had grown rather exponentially over the last couple of days.

“Yes, well, whether he is or not... my point is everybody is waiting for you to announce your engagement. Your necklace was a lot more elaborate than the earrings I wore so it drew attention.”

“Shit,” muttered Ginny. “Well I won’t have a reason to wear it again until the wedding. Everything will be public by then.”

“The wedding?” asked Hermione curiously. “I thought you were going to do a back yard thing like Bill and George both did.”

“I was thinking about it, but the party the other night inspired me. It was so much nicer than anything I’ve ever been to, even events at the Ministry... I didn’t even know what that kind

of thing was like. But we have a ballroom at Grimmauld Place, and it's still under the fidelius so it's more secure than the Burrow... I don't know. I mentioned it to Harry this morning, and he's into it, especially the security aspect. I'm going to have a hell of a time convincing Mum though. You know she likes to do things the same way each time."

"Well let me know if you need help. I'm sure my maid of honor duties include siding with you in any wedding conflicts with your mother."

So she's the maid of honor?

Draco wasn't terribly surprised by this. But it suddenly struck him that he would be going to Potter's wedding, assuming he didn't fuck it up with Hermione, and they were still together then.

I won't fuck it up. I won't.

"Thanks," Ginny laughed. "Well if that's what the necklace meant... was Narcissa pissed about your jewelry?"

"No, actually. She seemed rather pleased. It surprised me. And she and Draco are both saying I have to wear to Black or Malfoy jewelry going forward. Nothing Potter. It sounds like it will cause a scandal if I do. We just got lucky that we didn't screw it up the other night."

"Well I suppose it makes sense," said Ginny slowly. "If I wear Black jewelry they'll all think Draco gave it to me, and if you wear Potter jewelry they'll all think Harry gave it to you. Why are pureblood rituals such a shitshow?"

"You're the pureblood, you tell me," retorted Hermione.

"Well it's stupid, but we can play by those rules. I suppose Kreacher can sort it for us. You might as well take the Black things though, if it's going to cause a scandal for me to wear it."

"Oh Ginny, I couldn't possibly..." she started, but Ginny interrupted her.

"Sure you can. Harry won't care, you know he's been trying to get both of us to wear the stuff in his vault for ages. Besides, he can always get me something new if I want to wear sapphires or whatever. You know he likes to buy jewelry."

Hermione snorted. "True. He bought nearly all of mine."

Wait, what?

"Yes, because you're his sister. He has to spend his money on *something*, and I fought him about it for ages."

Ah. Rather like the house then.

"Well I understand why you fought him about it now," muttered Hermione. "I swear, if you hadn't prepped me for it, I never would have said yes to Palate. It's far too expensive."

So I have Ginny Weasley to thank for the best date of my life?

“Look, Draco’s got more money than he knows what to do with,” said Ginny. “Harry does too. You’re the one who told me years ago to let Harry spend his money the way he wanted to and don’t worry about what other people think. It makes him happy. Draco’s obviously wired the same way or he never would have taken you there. And you had fun.”

“I did, it’s the best date I’ve ever been on.”

“There you go, then. Let him spoil you rotten and don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll try Gin, I just...”

“You really like him, but it’s so new you’re afraid that you’ll give your heart away if you let him do those things for you. And then if it doesn’t go well your heart will break, and you’ll forever compare every other wizard to him. Believe me, I get it.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly... Oh God Gin, I like him *so* much, and it feels like I’m in somebody else’s life right now... These kinds of things *never* happen to me...”

At this Draco knew he had heard enough. Somehow, it was remarkably comforting to know that she was just as worried as he was about messing things up, even though she was the one who had experience being in a relationship. But Draco was determined to spoil her. It was the only way he knew how to show her how he felt, and he really hoped she would keep letting him do it. Smiling softly he slowly rolled up the extendable ear and settled in with a book while he waited for his girlfriend to emerge from the stacks.

Don’t worry, beautiful. I like you so much too. And you better get used to it, because this really is your life now, and I don’t intend to stop.

Chapter 16: Duel

Hermione

“So you see, Minerva, the article was wrong. We got together on New Year’s Eve after Draco asked me to dance, and this is the first chance we’ve had to tell you about it in person. The staff handbook makes it clear that we need to inform you, but there’s no prohibition against our... being together in general.”

Hermione and Draco were in the Headmistress’s office, and Hermione was more nervous about this than she cared to admit. She rather felt like quite a lot was riding on this conversation with her mentor, and she and Draco had agreed that she should be the one to do it. Hermione was the clear favorite.

Minerva sat back and studied them both. Hermione felt herself blush.

“Well I can’t say I’m terribly surprised,” she finally said. “And Horace owes me ten galleons now.”

Hermione gaped at her. “Excuse me?”

Minerva gave her a small smile. “I said Horace owes me ten galleons. I bet it would happen before the new term. He bet second term.”

Hermione turned to look at Draco who gave her a bemused shrug back.

“Erm... yes, he owes you ten galleons then. I suppose you won... barely.”

“Excellent,” said Minerva, clapping her hands. “Now then, I only ask that you maintain appropriate decorum in front of the students and other staff members. You are certainly not the first teaching couple to get together at Hogwarts, though it’s been quite a while since the last one if memory serves. You each have your own rooms so what you do in the privacy of your quarters is nobody’s business but yours. That being said, in public spaces, I would ask you to limit your displays of affection to the things that we would normally accept from the students.”

“So no shagging on the parapet of the Astronomy Tower,” chimed in Draco. “Got it.”

Minerva just raised one eyebrow at him.

“What?” he asked innocently. “I’ve caught Gryffindors up there before. Hermione expressed some interest.”

Hermione stomped on his foot, and he gave her his most charming smile.

Minerva just rolled her eyes. “No, I would say the Astronomy Tower is off limits, Draco, unless you can convince Harry Potter to loan you his invisibility cloak.”

Now Hermione’s jaw dropped while Draco got an intent look on his face.

Bloody hell he’s probably going to owl Harry the moment we’re out of here.

Hermione cleared her throat. “Erm, thanks Minerva. I think we understand the parameters.”

Minerva nodded and they both rose. “You go on, love, I want to ask Minerva something,” said Draco.

Hermione looked at him curiously, but nodded as she slipped out of the Headmistress’s office and made her way back to the staff common room.

They had done it. Minerva had given her blessing, and now they had a couple of private spots where they could explore their relationship without risk of getting fired. Hermione sighed with relief as she pulled the door open, and she nearly ran headfirst into John Dawlish.

“Hermione,” he said coldly.

Hermione sighed to herself. She had been expecting this, and she didn’t particularly like John, but it would still be unpleasant.

“John. Did you have a nice break?”

“Not as nice as yours, it seems.”

She just raised an eyebrow at this. “Yes, I’ve had a rather enjoyable few days. It’s quite new for me.”

He just scowled. “He’s a Death Eater, you know. I fought very hard against his appointment here.”

Hermione felt a spark of anger. “He was a child, and it’s in the past. I can assure you that I am very aware of that sort of thing, and I wouldn’t be dating him if I had any doubts about his views now. I suggest you keep your opinions about it to yourself.”

He just pursed his lips but let it drop. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at this but let it drop too as she started to move past him.

“Hermione,” he said, and she stopped and turned back.

“The dueling club,” he continued. “If you still think you’re up for a demonstration, we’ll be having our first meeting next Saturday directly after dinner. I’ve already posted the notices in the House common rooms.”

Hermione felt herself brighten at this a little, and she nodded. “Yes, I’d love to help with a demonstration.”

She could tell he was barely resisting rolling his eyes at her, but he nodded nonetheless and then turned away from her.

Just you wait, she thought.

It took several days for the news about Hermione's relationship with Draco to settle. The student body was all abuzz about it, and Hermione sensed a distinct chilliness coming from the seventh year girls and the Slytherins in particular. Neville had largely been avoiding her, and Dawlish continued to make snide comments to her. But after a week of watching Draco make her coffee and kiss her on the cheek whenever he saw her at meals, everyone was forced to accept that it had really happened: Hermione Granger was with Draco Malfoy.

For his part, Draco had declared her room to be superior to his thanks to the privacy afforded by the end of the hall and the spectacular view. He had unofficially moved in with her, and they slept in her bed every night, usually after Draco had coaxed an orgasm or two out of her. Hermione quickly got used to being held while she slept, because Draco continued to cling to her at night and wouldn't let go. She had to admit that between his dream potion and the wizard himself, it was the best sleep Hermione had gotten in years.

Yes, other than the awkwardness with Neville and the low grade hostility from Dawlish and a few particularly put out seventh year girls, things settled into normal, but now with a dishy boyfriend who treated her like a princess. And the sex was really good.

"Let me make you come just like this," he said as he pressed her against the wall, while he dropped to his knees in front of her. "Let me taste your sweet cunt."

God his dirty talk is going to end me.

"Alright," she breathed, and he grabbed his wand to vanish her clothes before leaning in.

"I've wanted to eat you out like this since that night at your parents' house," he said between licks. "You taste so good darling, it's my favorite flavor."

Hermione groaned as she felt her knees go weak.

"Stay upright for me beautiful," and Hermione put her hands on his shoulders to hold herself up as she began to shake.

"There she is..." he said. "Come for me. *Now*," and he found her clit and sucked.

Hermione broke, and he drank every drop, before standing up, opening his pants and then burying himself in her as pushed her against the wall.

He held her leg up and drove into her. “You’re taking me in so good. Just like that. Salazar help me, your tits are going to kill me one of these days.”

Then he dipped his head to bury his face in her breasts like a man possessed. It wasn’t long before she was coming again, and Draco was joining her.

Then he pulled her down on the floor with him and held her close as he leaned against the wall.

“Draco, we have to go to class.”

“Fuck class. I’m just fine right here.”

She smiled a bit. “Go to class, and then come to the dueling club after dinner to watch. John invited Harry too to drum up interest. Harry’s going to duel the winner. Of course John is sure it will be him.”

He looked down at her in surprise. “Seriously?”

She nodded and rolled her eyes. “Yes, but I rather think *I’ll* be the one dueling Harry by the end of it. Either way, John won’t be able to beat both of us. Harry’s way too good. We practiced a bit over Christmas.”

Draco grinned at this. “This I need to see.”

He disentangled himself from her, and Hermione smiled. “Get ready to be impressed by your girl.”

He smirked. “I’m always impressed by you love. And you should get ready for a good fucking once it’s all over. I find the notion of you kicking some other bloke’s arse strangely erotic.”

Hermione just laughed, and she shoo’d him to class.

Later on that evening she wore robes to dinner for the first time ever. Draco just stared at her in confusion.

“I’ve got my dueling clothes underneath,” she muttered. “They aren’t really appropriate for dinner.”

He gave her a very interested look at this, but ate quickly and stood up with Minerva and several other members of staff who had volunteered to help clear the Great Hall for the dueling club. Before long the tables were gone, and the stage where the staff ate had been extended. Students were milling about, and everyone turned when the doors burst open, and Harry came striding in.

Predictably there was excited muttering, but Hermione ran over to him and gave him a big hug.

“Hey Hermione, ready to show these kids how to do it?” he grinned.

Draco wandered over and to her surprise shook Harry's hand.

She smiled back. "Yes, but I have to beat Dawlish first. You're dueling the winner."

Harry just snorted. "You'll beat him in under thirty seconds."

"Perhaps I should give him longer to..." she started.

To her surprise Harry and Draco spoke at the same time. "No."

"It's the first rule of dueling, Hermione. Take your opponent out as fast as you can," said Harry.

"And he's a pompous prick," added Draco.

Harry shot him a questioning look.

"Dawlish thinks defensive transfiguration is a waste of time," clarified Draco.

Harry's face darkened at this, but then he nodded. "If he won't use it then you'll have him out within five spells. The techniques have totally transformed the auror department."

Hermione nodded. She knew this of course.

"Hey Potter," said Draco.

Harry looked at him questioningly.

"Twenty galleons says she kicks your arse too."

Harry grinned and reached out for Draco's hand. "I'll take that bet."

"Oh honestly!" said Hermione.

Draco just grinned at her. "No pressure love. Stakes just make it more interesting. Besides, Minerva and Horace inspired me."

Hermione rolled her eyes at this but said nothing more as she took her robes off to reveal her normal dueling outfit. She always wore trainers, yoga pants, and an athletic top that was stretchy and skin tight. Harry looked totally unsurprised by it, having seen it dozens of times before in practice. He himself was dressed in the male equivalent. But she couldn't help but notice that Draco eyed her arse with considerable interest.

She just smirked as she and Harry made their way to the stage where Dawlish was getting everyone's attention.

"Good evening!" he said. "And welcome to the first meeting of the dueling club! You all will be learning quite a bit about practical defense, and also offensive techniques to win your duels. Now we have a couple of special guests tonight for our first meeting. Your Transfiguration instructor, Professor Granger, has kindly agreed to provide a short

demonstration while she duels with me. And then Harry Potter will be dueling whichever one of us wins. As you all know, Harry and I are both aurors. And Professor Granger, of course, assisted Mr. Potter somewhat when it came to his defeat of Voldemort.”

Hermione heard Harry snort quietly next to her. “More like saved my arse multiple times,” he muttered, and she gave him a small smile of gratitude.

“Stick around the stage Harry,” added Dawlish. “I don’t think this first duel will take very long.”

“No I don’t imagine it will,” said Harry blithely, and Hermione saw Draco smirk at this from the corner of the room.

How odd to see them on the same side for once.

But it didn’t matter how odd it was. It warmed Hermione’s heart to feel that unwavering confidence from both her boyfriend and her best friend.

Harry moved to the edge of the stage as Hermione and Dawlish moved toward the center, and Hermione couldn’t help but notice he was standing behind her and not Dawlish.

He knows what I’m about to do.

And it was true. She and Harry had dueled so frequently they could often predict each other’s behavior. And Harry’s statement that she could have Dawlish out within five spells was generous. They both knew it wouldn’t take that many, and Harry was staying well clear of the blast radius.

“On the count of three!” shouted Dawlish. “One, two, three, *stupefy!*”

Hermione had been expecting it, and she immediately dropped to the floor with her wand out. She quickly conjured a large boulder right in front of Dawlish as she fell, and he looked at it in confusion for a moment before she shouted, “*Reducto!*”

The boulder exploded, and Dawlish went flying backwards. Hermione got to her feet and peered down at him curiously. He groaned and moved a bit so she said, “*Stupefy,*” almost lazily as she knocked him out for good.

She turned to face the students who were all looking at her in utter shock. She noticed most of the staff who had stayed behind looked surprised as well, though Minerva was nodding with approval. And then there was Draco who was looking at her like he wanted to fuck her ragged. Hermione felt that familiar, delicious heat start between her legs.

Not now, Draco, honestly. I have a real duel next. Do you want me to lose your twenty galleons?

“As you can all see,” she said calmly, as she pointedly ignored her boyfriend and her body that was trying to betray her, “transfiguration can be rather useful in a duel. It’s a way of distracting and even crippling your opponent.”

“Yes,” Harry chimed in as he stepped forward. “And when Professor Granger and I duel, you’ll see quite a bit of it. Defensive transfiguration is Professor Granger’s specialty, and it’s become mine as well. The auror department has incorporated it into its training because it can be so surprising and effective. Now let’s revive Auror Dawlish so he can watch.”

Hermione smiled and waved her wand to clear the debris. Then she walked over to Dawlish and placed her wand against his chest.

“Rennervate.”

Draco

Draco was painfully hard as he watched his girlfriend take out Dawlish in three spells.

She really only needed two, he thought. That stupefy at the end was just for good measure.

It really shouldn’t have been as hot as it was, but Draco couldn’t help it. Maybe it was her clothes, which showed off that delectable arse to perfection. Maybe it was her confidence as she casually ignored Dawlish’s jabs about her and just took care of business. Or maybe it was the fact that she was bloody powerful, despite how small she was. Draco wasn’t sure what it was, but he knew he was having a very public erection as he watched her duel.

She revived Dawlish who had an exceptionally bitter expression on his face as he stood and then stepped aside. Draco was pleased to see Potter catch the dark look, and he stepped in between Dawlish and Hermione as he turned to face her.

Good. Potter will turn on him if he tries anything.

For his part, Draco casually made his way toward that side of the stage as well and drew his own wand, just in case. Dawlish had just been publicly humiliated, and Draco didn’t trust him as far as he could throw him. As he moved that way he passed David Fawley, who was watching Potter and Hermione with wide eyes. Draco smiled a little at this. He knew that Fawley practically hero worshiped Hermione, and based on his expression as he watched Potter, it looked like Fawley felt the same way about him.

“Alright Hermione, what are our rules?” asked Potter.

He saw Hermione frown for a moment as she thought about it and then glanced at Minerva. “Professor McGonagall, you’ve seen us duel a number of times before. Can we use our normal rules?”

Minerva hesitated, but then nodded. “Yes, but please explain it to the students first.”

They both nodded, and Draco listened curiously as Potter turned to address the students. “When Professor Granger and I duel you may see us use spells that are illegal for regular use. She and I both have Ministry clearance to use them during practices like this. Please keep in mind this is just a demonstration, and you all shouldn’t necessarily use every spell you might see.”

There was some murmuring at this, and Draco felt himself tense.

Hermione chimed in and addressed the students as well. “Our rules are fairly simple. We duel until one person is totally incapacitated. That means they are knocked out or otherwise incapable of casting spells. We don’t pause for injuries, and every spell is allowed except for *Avada Kedavra*. I do hope you all aren’t squeamish.”

There was more murmuring at this, and Draco’s stomach clenched. *Fuck, they use unforgiveables.*

He was suddenly very nervous as he watched his girlfriend swallow and face Potter. Even Dawlish’s bitter look had disappeared, and he was watching with a slightly wary expression on his face now. He clearly had no idea that Potter and Hermione dueled each other with dark magic on a regular basis.

To Draco’s surprise they didn’t even count off. Potter twitched, and the moment he moved Granger sent a *reducto* straight to his chest.

Holy fuck, thought Draco in alarm, as Potter dodged it and sent a large cutting hex back at her, which grazed her a bit on the side. She started to bleed a little, but she completely ignored it as she conjured a boulder directly over Potter’s head, and he was forced to dive out of the way to avoid being crushed.

As he rolled an enormous snake exploded from the end of his wand, and he started talking to it in parseltongue. It slithered toward Hermione, hissing and spitting at her. Hermione attempted to vanish it, but Potter was trying to stun her at the same time. He was forcing her to dance around to avoid his spells, since she couldn’t vanish the snake and hold a shield charm simultaneously. As she moved she couldn’t get a clear shot at the snake with the precision she needed for vanishing, and it was quickly getting closer and closer to her. Draco’s heart seized as he watched it rear back for attack. But then she growled in frustration before shouting, “*Sectumsempra!*” and the large orange spell that had ripped Draco open all those years ago passed across the snake and sliced it in half.

The students gasped in shock and disgust as blood sprayed across the stage, but Hermione and Potter ignored them as Potter went on the offensive, and to Draco’s horror he now saw what Hermione had meant all those months ago when she told him that she had a lot of practice with knives.

Potter started rapidly conjuring knives to send them straight toward Hermione. As they flew through the air, she ducked and dodged and transfigured the ones coming straight at her into harmless flowers that fell on the stage, just like Draco had seen in that detention. Draco felt his stomach lurch as one knife cut her shoulder, but she didn’t pause as she kept transfiguring the knives she couldn’t dodge, all while trying to stun Potter in between.

Hermione suddenly switched tactics and conjured a large barrier to stop the knives, and she and Potter both stepped back and exploded it at the same time, causing all the students watching to duck. Then to Draco's shock they both shouted "*Imperio!*" at the same time as well, the moment the dust had cleared and they could see each other again.

Hermione's spell didn't connect, but Potter's did, and Draco watched in disbelief as she went completely still for a split second as she tried to fight it. The moment she was still Potter tried to stun her, but she broke out of the curse just in the nick of time and dropped and rolled, sending a stunner to Potter's feet as she did so. Potter did an odd little spin and then shouted, "*Incarcerous!*" and sent ropes to bind Hermione who was still on the floor and hadn't gotten to her feet yet.

The ropes connected, and Hermione's wand went clattering. Draco was sure it was over now, but then to the surprise of everybody in the room, she disappeared, and a moment later a small black cat jumped out from the bindings before running over to her wand. Draco saw Potter try to stun the cat, but she was too fast for him, and he huffed in frustration as Hermione turned back into herself and scooped up her wand.

She shouted, "*Glissendo!*" and Potter fell flat on his arse as the floor beneath him became slippery. He was forced to waste time muttering the countercurse as Hermione tried to stun him, but he threw up a shield charm to avoid her stunners while he waited for the floor to solidify again.

The moment Potter had stable footing he lept up, and this time he was the one who conjured a boulder over Hermione's head. Draco's heart stopped as she dove out of the way, but it grazed her side and threw her off balance, and she hit the ground harder than she intended. She sent one last rather violent cutting hex toward Potter as she fell, which surprisingly caught him in the wand arm and caused him to start bleeding profusely. But he ignored it and sent a stunner straight toward Hermione, which hit her squarely in the face, and she passed out.

Draco felt an enormous amount anxiety as she laid there utterly still, but Potter quickly moved toward her and revived her before helping her sit up.

"Bloody hell, Harry," she said, and it broke the tension in the room as some of the students laughed. Potter spoke to her too quietly to hear for a moment, before he nodded and then left her sitting on the floor. He rose and turned to the students who fell silent to listen.

"Defensive transfiguration," he said quietly. "Boulders, snakes, ropes, knives, flowers, barriers, even animagi transformations. Dueling took many leaps forward once Professor Granger developed these techniques. And I'll tell you that when she and I duel each other, it's usually some type of defensive transfiguration that catches the other one off guard. I caught her at the end with that boulder, and that's why she tripped, and I was able to stun her. But she and I are very evenly matched, and in any given duel my odds are only about fifty-fifty that I'll win. Same for her. I just got lucky today."

Draco saw Hermione give Harry a tired smile at this.

“Now I’ll turn it back over to you, Auror Dawlish, but I’m happy to walk through the students to assist.”

Draco half listened as Dawlish began to explain stunning, and then he and Potter started walking through the students to correct them. But Draco couldn’t help but watch Hermione, who was still sitting on the stage, looking pale and a bit shaky. Draco saw with a jolt that she still had blood on her, and he started to make his way toward her, but he was waylaid by a couple students who asked for help. Keeping one eye on her, Draco explained the theory behind stunning as quickly as he could, as he tried to shake them off to get to Hermione. As he started to move back toward her, he saw Potter coming over, looking curiously at David Fawley.

“Hi, I’m Harry Potter,” he said to Fawley. “Are you David Fawley by any chance? Hermione was telling me about you.”

Slightly diverted by this despite himself, Draco whipped around to look at Fawley and saw his eyes were enormous, as he started to splutter. Draco just shook his head as he glanced back up at the stage to check on Hermione. He was confused to discover that she had disappeared, and he looked around quickly but didn’t see her anywhere. Draco felt a slight panic rising until he spotted the small black cat slinking out of the door to the Great Hall. Draco noticed the little cat was limping slightly, and he started to push his way through the students to follow.

Even injured she still had four legs while he only had two, and by the time he got through the crowd and to the door, she was disappearing around the corner to the staff corridor.

Stubborn witch, she needs the hospital wing, thought Draco in frustration. But he strode after her and saw her turn back into Hermione as she said the password and slipped through the portrait hole. Draco raced to catch up to her, but she was already out of the common room, and Draco strode to her room where he was sure he would find her. Sure enough, when he got inside he found the small black cat, shaking like a leaf as she curled up on a pillow that had been discarded on the floor.

“Hermione,” he said. The little cat just looked up at him and meowed a bit pitifully.

“Hermione, turn back into yourself. Let me look at you, please darling.”

A moment later, Hermione appeared, and Draco gasped now that he could see her up close. She was very pale, and there was an odd stain on her shoulder and her side where the knives and cutting hex had gotten her. Her dark shirt had hidden the full extent of her injuries.

“Hermione, you need to go to the hospital wing,” he said.

She just shook her head, while she closed her eyes.

“I’m serious mon coeur. You need a healer.”

“She’ll make me take dreamless sleep,” Hermione muttered. “I don’t want it. I’ll heal it in a minute once I’m not so…”

She trailed off blearily and swayed a bit, and Draco's alarm deepened. He couldn't really blame Hermione for wanting to avoid Pomfrey if she was unwilling to take dreamless sleep. She had never told him directly whether or not she had a dependency issue with it too, but her knowing looks when Draco had told her about his own struggles with it made him suspect. And now he was sure about it. She was starting to fade though and needed *something*. Muttering a curse under his breath he left her for a moment and strode to his room next door and pulled out his potions bag. He grabbed a blood replenishing potion he had been working on with Horace, as well as some pain relief and brought it back into her room.

"These are both still experimental," he said, "And the pain relief is really strong. It's probably going to make you a bit loopy. But it should work."

She just nodded, as he uncorked them and forced the potions down her throat. She shuddered but finally relaxed as the pain relief hit her.

"Lift your arms for me," he said, and she did as he asked. He peeled her shirt off of her to check around her sports bra, and his stomach turned to see quite a bit of blood on her side and shoulder. Her side was also severely bruised from the boulder that had grazed her.

"Hold still, I'm going to try to heal you," he muttered.

She didn't say anything to this, but just stayed very still as he muttered the few healing spells he had learned during the war. To his great relief the wound in her shoulder closed, and the bleeding stopped on her side, as the bruising lightened. He muttered a spell to remove the blood from her body and then stood and helped her make her way over to the bed.

"You and Potter are fucking insane for dueling like that," he said, as he settled her into bed. "I hope you know that."

"I'm just out of practice," she muttered. "Bloody boulder."

Draco just grimaced at this, but said nothing more as she settled back into bed.

"I need a wand," she grunted.

Draco was hesitant to let her use magic under the influence, but he decided to allow it and passed her wand to her. She muttered a spell across her abdomen, and Draco was surprised to see the right side turn green, while the left side turn red.

She raised herself slightly and then opened one eye to look at it, before grunting and throwing her wand aside. Draco could see she was starting to drift off.

"What was that?" Draco demanded.

"Checking tubes," she muttered. Draco could tell she was well in the grips of the pain relief potion now. He would have to question her carefully if he was going to get clear answers from her. He slipped into bed beside her, and she automatically curled into him.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

“Mmmm better now,” she said.

“Good. Now tell me why you need to check tubes?”

“Dolohov,” she muttered.

Draco stilled. *Dolohov? What the fuck does Dolohov have to do with anything?*

“Darling, Dolohov is in Azkaban.”

“Hope he fucking rots,” she murmured.

Draco’s eyebrows flew up. He hoped so too, but it was out of character for her.

“Did he do something to you?” asked Draco carefully.

“Scar,” she said. “Tried to sterilize me. No more mudbloods.”

The bottom dropped out of Draco’s stomach at this, and he disentangled himself to look down at her. She appeared to be perfectly content as she laid there, and Draco’s eyes drifted down to the thin, slightly purple scar that ran across half her lower abdomen on the left side before turning upwards. He had certainly wondered about it but never inquired. Her scars didn’t bother him, and he didn’t want to bring up bad memories from the war. But now he needed answers.

“Was it this, mon coeur?” he asked quietly as he traced it.

“Mmmhmmm,” she said sleepily. “Department of Mysteries. Fifth year.”

Fucking hell Dolohov had done this to her when she was sixteen? During the mission his father led?

Draco felt sick.

“I want to understand darling. What exactly did he do?”

“Tried to sever my fallopian tubes,” she muttered. “Only got one. I silenced him first. Almost bled out inside.”

Draco went cold. “I...” He was at a loss for words.

“You’re so pretty,” she said suddenly, and Draco looked down to find her staring at him now with a dreamy expression on her face. He was torn between amusement and exasperation.

“You’re pretty too darling.”

“Thank you,” she said politely.

Draco tried to steer the conversation back around to what they had been talking about. “Now I need you to tell me... can you have children?”

She furrowed her brow at this and got a rather hurt expression on her face. “You don’t want my children. You put me on the potion.”

This threw Draco off. He wanted her on the potion so he didn’t have to remember the charm. That was all. He was sure she didn’t want his children, not yet.

Did she?

Draco himself experienced a mixture of terror and deep longing as he considered the idea. What would he do if she was pregnant?

Marry her tomorrow and get her the best healer money can buy so she could bear my heir.

The notion took hold of him in some deeply intimate way. But he had to know.

“Darling, that’s not why I asked you to go on the potion. I just can’t remember the charm all the time. I didn’t think you would want children yet, and I wanted to brew it to make sure it’s effective and wouldn’t affect your sex drive.”

It was true. The commercial potion Poppy handed out had some ingredients that could suppress a witch’s sex drive. It was a well-known side effect. Draco had thrown himself into a quick and furious study of it as soon as they returned to Hogwarts, and he had made some tweaks. The version he brewed for her didn’t make her randier than usual, but that undesirable side effect wasn’t quite as strong as the commercial potions either. Draco thought his experimentation with it had been so successful that he and Horace could probably make a second fortune with it.

She harrumphed. “You didn’t *ask* if I wanted children though. You just assumed.”

Again Draco blinked, a bit bemused. He wondered if he dared ask her this, but she was being so candid tonight he had to know. “Alright. Do you want to have a baby? My baby?”

Her expression turned oddly soft. “Maybe someday.”

Draco felt himself smile at this. She could be so stubborn and yet so unbelievably sweet too.

“Someday sounds good,” he murmured as he leaned in to kiss her. She sighed and nestled into him again.

“Now tell me... you still can right? Dolohov didn’t...”

“I have one tube,” she muttered. “Only need one. Like kidneys. Just might take longer.”

Draco was struck by deep-seated relief. Dolohov had failed then. If things kept going this way... but then he remembered his mother’s words.

“How much longer?”

She shrugged. “Could be right away, could be a couple years. Can’t say.”

He furrowed his brow. "Hermione, I didn't cast the charm right away the first few times we had sex. You could be..." he trailed off.

"That's ok. I'll find out soon enough," she murmured. She didn't seem alarmed by the possibility at all.

"You wouldn't... mind?"

Again he was experiencing a very odd feeling. It was something deeply protective and possessive. Something that ignited a longing in him he couldn't quite pinpoint.

She just shook her head in his chest. "You're a good one. And very pretty. Our kids would be so pretty." She sighed a bit dreamily.

Draco couldn't help it. He smiled broadly at this. "Only if they take after their mother."

"Hmph you're prettier than me."

Draco rolled his eyes at her. "You're gorgeous mon coeur. What did I say about blokes wanting into your knickers?"

"It's just you who wants into my knickers," she muttered.

"Slander," he said, smiling into her hair. "Every bloke in the castle who's figured out how to wank is wanking to you. Especially after that duel."

"Fucking boulder," she grumbled. "Hurt like hell."

Draco turned serious again. "It didn't cause any further... injuries?"

She just shook her head. Draco sighed with relief, though he decided he would insist she see Poppy tomorrow morning just to be sure. Poppy surely wouldn't foist dreamless sleep on Hermione if she was really OK.

He looked down at her again. She was hazy like this but also very honest. He had a few more questions for her.

"Hermione, did you see me on the map?"

"I see everybody on the map," she muttered.

"Hmmm, but especially me?"

"You wouldn't tell me you play piano. I had to listen."

"Perfectly understandable darling. Can you tell me about this map though? I'm curious."

She reached for her wand again and then waved it as she said, "*Accio* Marauder's Map," and an old piece of parchment came flying out of her trunk. It was blank. She tapped it and muttered, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

Draco gave her an incredulous look at the incantation, but she ignored him and just tossed her wand away as she nestled into him again. Draco watched the parchment come alive in amazement.

“Merlin,” he breathed as he realized what he was staring at.

“It’s my Inner Eye,” she responded.

He cast her an amused glance but turned back to study the map. He saw many students in the Great Hall, along with half the staff and Potter. They were moving around, clearly still working on dueling. He and Hermione had dots practically on top of each other in her room. He glanced around again and then paused.

“Astoria’s by herself in the student potions store room,” he muttered.

“She’s been there a lot recently,” muttered Hermione.

He glanced back down at her. “Where on earth did you get this?”

“Harry’s dad helped write it. Sirius Black, Professor Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew helped too.”

Draco gaped again. *Fucking Peter Pettigrew?* That rat? And his mother’s cousin?

“They were all illegal animagi except Lupin,” she said a bit groggily. “Lupin was a werewolf. The others became animagi during school to stay with him during full moons, and they wrote the map.”

“That’s fucking crazy,” he said.

“Hmmm, yes, I told Sirius and Remus they were reckless after Sirius escaped from Azkaban.”

“Bloody hell,” he muttered. “So Potter inherited it?”

To his surprise she shook her head as she yawned. “No, Filch confiscated it at some point. The Weasley twins stole it out of his office. They gave it to Harry during third year.”

Draco just shook his head as he contemplated all the people who had used it. “How much chaos has this thing caused over the years?”

“Lots,” she said simply. “Dead useful when you need to sneak around the castle though.”

Draco couldn’t help but smile at this a little bit. “And also useful to catch students out of bed.”

She just nodded a bit sleepily.

They laid there for a few more minutes until Draco nearly jumped with surprise. Her hand was creeping toward the waistband of his pants.

“Hermione...” he warned.

“You promised,” she said. “And you got me all hot and bothered during the duel.”

Draco groaned at these words. “You’re injured princess. And you’re on a really strong pain potion.”

“So?” she said, and she reached in and grasped him. Draco gasped.

“You need rest,” he ground out.

“Don’t you want me?” she asked, and again he heard some hurt in her voice.

“Darling, I always want you. I’m mad for you. But I want you to heal.”

“You healed me. Now fuck me, please,” and she started pumping his cock.

“Salazar help me,” he muttered as his eyelids fluttered closed. He allowed himself to enjoy it for a shade longer than he should have before he grabbed her hand to stop it.

“Hermione, not tonight. Rest now, and I want Poppy to have a look at you in the morning. If she gives you the all clear I’ll fuck you until you can’t think straight, I promise.”

She harumphed at this, but stilled, and Draco breathed a sigh of relief as he closed his eyes to force his cock back down.

“If you find me playing with my toys in the middle of the night it’s all your fault.”

Draco’s eyes flew open.

“Toys?” he asked curiously.

“Mmmhmm. Toys I bought to survive my spinsterhood here.”

Draco snorted. Even under the influence of pain potion she was witty.

“You’re not a spinster love.”

“Not anymore. But how was I to know some ridiculously sexy wizard was going to sweep me off my feet?”

Draco felt his own ego swelling alarmingly fast.

“Ridiculously sexy am I?”

“I was talking about Neville,” she murmured, yawning again.

“Minx,” he said, chuckling.

She didn’t say anything more for a moment so he said, “Tell me about these toys.”

“The usual,” she summarized.

“Where are they then?” Draco would go investigate for himself if she was going to be deliberately cagey about it.

She gestured vaguely toward her nightstand, and Draco zeroed in on it. He spent several long minutes considering what they might be or look like. He vowed to check them out at the earliest opportunity.

“How often do you use them?” he finally asked.

But she had gone silent, and Draco looked down at her. She had fallen asleep snuggled against him. Draco smiled a little, an odd moment of tenderness filling him as he stroked her hair just a bit. She was so fierce, so brave. He had never seen anybody duel like she and Potter had done earlier that evening. And while it had terrified him to watch her do it, he had to admit it also impressed the hell out of him. Besides, he certainly didn’t mind patching her up, especially when it meant she ended up in bed, confessing her secrets, and then clinging to him like this.

He dropped a kiss on her head as he settled in too.

Mine. All mine.

Chapter 17: Sex Ed

Draco

The following morning Draco hauled Hermione to the hospital wing, where she received a clean bill of health from Poppy along with confirmation that she wasn't pregnant from their first few encounters before she went on the potion. Draco was surprised to find that he felt disappointed at this news, but he forced himself to put it aside to examine later. Once he was assured that Hermione was perfectly fine and all of her injuries had been healed the night before, Draco finally allowed Hermione to drag him up to the Astronomy Tower.

"I hardly remember what happened last night, but based upon the fact that I'm not sore I assume you never fulfilled your promise," she said as she practically attacked his mouth.

Draco barely had time to ward the door and cast silencing charms before she was pulling his shirt out of his trousers and yanking it over his head. He smiled into her lips as he kissed her eagerly.

"I want you naked," he said, and to his delight she stepped back and swiftly undressed herself, while he unclasped his pants and watched her.

I'll never get enough of this, he thought as he stared at her tight little body bathed in the morning light. It was January, but the Astronomy Tower was always charmed to be a comfortable temperature, though a breeze still passed through it, sending her curls flying.

She looked like some sort of nymph — a mythical creature almost too beautiful and wild to catch, tempting him with her sex and sweetness. Draco had the strangest thought that if they had been in the Forbidden Forest right now she would probably run from him and slip from his grasp as she laughed and led him on a merry chase. But they weren't in the Forest. He had her trapped in the Tower, right where he wanted her. And one look at her told him she was eager, desperate even — his very own little naiad who wanted nothing more than to please him and be pleased in return.

He suddenly had an idea, and she was so randy he thought she might be willing.

"On your knees, legs apart darling."

Her eyes darkened at this, but she sank to her knees without a word and did as he said, looking up at him.

"Hands behind your head. Lace your fingers together and show me those pretty tits."

She inhaled but slowly did as he said, and he just stared at her for a moment in slight disbelief that he actually had her like this.

He dropped his hands into his pants and walked around her slowly, stroking himself as he studied her.

“I could look at you like this all day,” he said. “So ready. So perfect. So good and... obedient.”

As he watched her whole body flushed, and her core started to glisten.

“Does that turn you on, princess? Do you like to do as I say?”

She closed her eyes for a moment and nodded.

“Words,” he said sharply.

“I... yes, Draco.”

He nodded to himself. “I thought so. I sensed it in you from that very first night. And I like this too. You’re so lovely like this.”

She was looking dazed now and more desperate than ever. Draco dropped on his knees behind her.

“Stay just like you are,” he whispered as he ran one palm from her neck down between her breasts before lifting her hair with his other hand and kissing her neck. He felt her shudder, but he just smirked. He used a finger to circle her nipples almost lazily as she held the pose, before he pinched one hard.

She gasped and arched forward even more, and her hands started to slip.

“Stay like you are,” he reminded her, as his fingers danced across her abdomen and sides, drifting down toward her core.

She was breathing heavily, and he felt goosebumps erupt across her skin. “So sensitive... tell me, pretty girl, how wet are you?”

“So wet,” she breathed.

“Is it running down your legs yet?”

“I... I...” she was becoming slightly incoherent with need, and Draco saw her thighs were quivering. She was so responsive. It was hardly any work for him at all to get her to this place.

“Let’s check, shall we?” and he brushed a finger down between her folds, and it came back covered in her want.

Then he said, “Open up.”

She did so immediately, and once again she was swirling her tongue around his fingers, making his cock wish it was in her mouth instead. Speaking of which...

“That mouth of yours is so eager. You want my cock beautiful?”

“Oh *yes* please,” she groaned, and Draco nearly seized. He swiftly stood and released his cock from his pants before coming around in front of her and presenting it to her. She caught it in her mouth and sucked eagerly while he threaded his hands through her hair to help guide her.

“Keep your hands just like they are,” he gasped. “Just fuck me with your mouth.”

She proceeded to do exactly as he said, and Draco released a groan as his head fell back and his eyes closed to relish the moment. He had Hermione Granger naked and on her knees in a not-entirely-private place, *eager* to suck him off. She had even said *please* for fuck’s sake. Draco knew that some god somewhere must have finally forgiven him for his sins because that was the only explanation for something like this actually happening to him.

The only problem was her mouth was too good. And Draco had promised her a fucking, and he was determined to keep his promise. He let her continue until his balls started to tighten, and then he pulled her mouth off of him.

“Stand up,” he said, and she wobbled a bit as she did as he said. He steadied her and caught her lips for a moment, as she sighed into him.

“Now I know what you want,” he said as he moved to her neck. “And it’s risky because it’s daylight, and you’re naked love. We might put on a show for any quidditch players flying around the pitch.”

“Notice-me-nots,” she breathed.

“Ah, I don’t think so,” he said as he dropped his mouth to her nipples. “They don’t work well on moving targets. I think we’re just going to have to risk it. If you want the parapet that badly, then you have to be willing to fuck me in public.”

“I... oh God *yes*,” she said.

Draco could hardly believe it, but he had to admit that the small risk of being seen really turned him on too.

“What would the students say if they saw their transfiguration professor getting fucked like that?” he asked in an amused voice.

“A hundred points for Gryffindor,” she retorted, and he just laughed as he released her and grabbed her hand to pull her over to the edge.

He swooped down to grab his wand on the way recalling what she said about sticking charms. He would give this to her, but he wasn’t *completely* idiotic.

“Up you go love, and spread those lovely legs for me.”

She hopped up with a giggle and Draco grinned as he muttered a sticking charm to adhere her bum to the stone as she opened for him.

As he slotted himself inside of her, he had to admit that maybe the Gryffindors had a point about this. She was at precisely the right height for his cock, and he could use the elevations in the stone wall around her for leverage. Knowing that she wasn't at risk to go flying over the edge, Draco relaxed and enjoyed the view over the lake as he started to thrust.

"Oh God Draco, just like that," she groaned, and Draco's entire attention was pulled back toward his witch, as she opened herself so wantonly for him and began to tremble.

"Arch back for me princess. You won't fall."

She did, and Draco enjoyed the sight of her tits pressed toward his face while the angle shifted ever so slightly, and she suddenly began to moan.

"So good..." she gasped, and Draco just stared at her in awe as her face transformed and her orgasm approached. Then a flash of something out of the corner of his eye drew Draco's gaze up. He saw Davies, the Slytherin quidditch captain flying around the pitch.

"We have an audience," he groaned. "Davies is out."

"I don't care," she gasped. "Sex education."

Draco's smile nearly split his face in two as he doubled down, and her moans became louder. The sounds of her floated into the air and made Davies whip around. He nearly fell off his broom when he saw Draco shagging a witch on the parapet of the Astronomy Tower with her naked back to him. Her wild curls gave her away of course — not that there was really any question about *who* Draco Malfoy would be shagging at Hogwarts — but Draco just put a finger to his lips and raised one eyebrow toward Davies as he continued to thrust.

Davies nodded frantically before tearing off the pitch, flying as fast as he could to get to the ground and away from them. Draco laughed again as he looked down at his witch, so very close to her climax.

"Come for me, pretty girl. Right now."

As if on command, he felt her break with a beautiful moan, and her walls shuddered around him. Draco dropped his face into her hair as he pumped harder, before allowing his own pleasure to release. They stayed like that for a moment, clinging to each other, until finally she turned her face up to look at him.

"Thank you," she said. "I've always wanted to do that."

He just grinned down at her. "Next time I catch some wayward Gryffindors up here I won't take as many points. I'll admit I see the appeal."

She laughed, as he pulled back, cleaned them up and then unstuck her bum from the parapet. He carefully guided her down until she had two feet safely on the stone floor, and then he threw his clothes at her. "Come on," he said. "Lunch will be starting any minute."

They dressed and made their way down to the Great Hall, where they ran headfirst into Davies, who turned crimson when he saw them.

“Mr. Davies, I hope you had an excellent morning,” said Hermione cordially.

“Erm, yes, Professor, excellent,” he sputtered.

“Good, good,” she said. “Nothing like a little morning air, is there?”

Draco struggled not to laugh as she turned and made her way up to the staff table, appearing perfectly at ease.

Davies' huge eyes followed her, and then he looked back at Draco and gulped.

“Err, sorry about...” he trailed off awkwardly.

“Nothing to worry about,” said Draco. “Evidently it’s a Gryffindor thing. At first I thought it was bloody mad, but turns out it’s rather invigorating up there. I would, however, suggest sticking charms for safety.”

Then he clapped a stunned Davies on the shoulder. Draco couldn’t help but notice that Davies’ eyes were now fixed on the other side of the Great Hall, as he stared at a group of seventh year Gryffindor girls like he had never seen them properly before.

Draco just chuckled to himself.

A little interhouse unity wouldn't be such a bad thing.

Hermione

Hermione continued to assist with the dueling club, having convinced Dawlish that she could, in fact, actually duel. Even Harry had continued to show up for the Saturday meetings most weeks, and Hermione smiled to remember the D.A. Harry was a fantastic Defense teacher, and Hermione was pleased he got to scratch that itch in an unofficial way. Minerva, of course, had no qualms about him being there, and even Dawlish didn’t mind as much as Hermione thought he would. There was no question that Harry drew a crowd, and Dawlish’s dueling club had quickly become the most popular student group at Hogwarts.

Harry and Hermione continued with their exhibition duels to start each club meeting, and before long her reputation among the student body as a witch not to be trifled with was secure. Even Dawlish and little Professor Flitwick, who had been a dueling champion in his youth, appeared slightly terrified of her. Minerva, however, smiled knowingly whenever she watched two of her all-time favorite students duel using transfiguration techniques. Then there was Draco, who continued to show up for the “erection factor,” as he had dubbed it. He insisted the only reason he came was because her duels gave him a raging hard on, but Hermione suspected his ongoing bets with Harry had something to do with it too. They made

a bet every week on the outcome on Harry's and Hermione's duel. It drove Hermione a bit mad, but she had to admit it warmed her heart that her boyfriend always bet on her, and he didn't seem to care when she lost his money.

Harry was a slightly better duelist than she was now, having spent the entire fall term still training with the aurors while Hermione was at Hogwarts. But Hermione was getting back into the swing of things, and in the fourth meeting she finally caught Harry with some transfiguration of his own clothing. It surprised him so much he tripped, and she was able to stun him, to the astonishment of all the students who had come. That night Draco had celebrated her achievement by pounding her into the mattress like his life depended on it.

“That. Was. The. Hottest. Fucking. Thing,” he gasped.

Things with Draco were a bit of an anomaly for Hermione. Ever since that first night of the dueling club, something had shifted between them just the slightest bit, and Hermione wasn't certain why. Thanks to the pain potion she took that night Hermione couldn't remember much of what they had discussed. The only thing she was sure she had told him about was the Marauder's Map because he now asked to examine it before each round of patrol. She had to admit though, she was very fuzzy about everything else, and she was kicking herself that she couldn't remember. She sensed that she must have said a few things to Draco that accounted for the slight changes she noticed in him, but she wasn't certain.

Draco now insisted she be checked by Poppy every single time she was hit by any spell or some other object during her dueling, and he would fuss over her until he was satisfied that she was fine. Then he would always pull Poppy aside out of earshot and question her about something, but neither Draco nor Poppy seemed willing to tell Hermione what they were discussing. It drove her a bit mad, but he would get so worked up about it that she couldn't tell him no. Hermione was just relieved that the one time Poppy tried to push dreamless sleep potion on her, Draco backed her up so thoroughly that Poppy actually cowered a bit under the intensity of his glare. She had never tried to get Hermione to take it again, so Hermione consented to the weekly check-ups.

Then there was the way she caught him watching her when he thought she wasn't looking. He would assume an almost wistful expression on his face, as though he was missing something.

And when he read *The Prophet* in the evenings she thought he seemed to linger over any article that mentioned the former Death Eaters, though she couldn't be sure. He always encouraged her to puzzle while he read, almost as though he wanted her to be distracted.

He was brooding over something, she was almost certain of it, but she couldn't bring herself to press him about it. Their relationship was still too new.

But despite these slightly odd things she had noticed, Hermione wouldn't change her relationship with Draco for the world. Draco had become more affectionate than ever when they were alone together, and the moment things turned heated between them he took control. Hermione was almost embarrassed by how much she liked it, but she knew he really liked it too. It gave her the freedom to just let go and not think, but only *feel*. For his part, Draco seemed to get a rush whenever she opened for him, presented for him, and followed

his instructions. Each time it was like he couldn't believe how lucky he was that she would do it, and he would reward her cooperation by making her come, often more than once.

And now it was Valentine's Day, and Hermione wasn't exactly sure what to expect from her new boyfriend.

"You're free tonight?" he asked her that morning.

She nodded, blushing a little.

"Good, I want to show you something. But later. I have to survive NEWT potions today first."

"Oh?" she asked in amusement. "What's so terrible about NEWT potions?"

"Horace has gotten it in his head that he should let them brew fucking amortentia for Valentine's Day. It's a terrible idea, but I can't talk him out of it."

Hermione just raised her eyebrows at this.

"Believe me, I know. The last thing I want to do is teach a bunch of horny teenagers how to brew a love potion."

"Because you'll have to tell them what yours smells like?" she teased.

"Mine smells like you. No, I'm pissed because it's a fucking hazard to have in the castle. And if it doesn't go right it can poison you."

But Hermione hardly heard what he was saying because she was so fixated on the first thing he had just told her.

Mine smells like you.

"Erm... are you sure it smells like me?"

He looked at her squarely. "I would be shocked if it didn't. I taste you in my dream potion."

Now Hermione was even more surprised. "You do?"

He nodded. "I told you, it's citrus and floral. It tastes the way your perfume smells."

Hermione blushed deeply. "I... I taste you in mine also."

He gave her a small smile at this as he moved forward and tilted her head up for a kiss. "I'll admit I hoped you did."

"What does that mean then?" she asked curiously. "If we taste each other."

"It's the thing that attracts us the most. That's all."

Hermione nodded at this, trying not to feel disappointed.

Honestly Hermione, did you think it means he's in love with you? Amortentia doesn't create love, just infatuation. You know that. They pulled the theory for their potion from amortentia.

“Well good luck surviving a whole dungeon that smells like me.”

He gave her a long-suffering look. “You’re assuming they can actually do it. It’s a very complex potion.”

She laughed at this a little. “I’ll see you tonight then?”

He nodded. “Provided I make it out unscathed, yes.”

Hermione was distracted most of the day as she thought about amortentia and whatever it was Draco had wanted to show her tonight.

He finally showed up at dinner looking wrung out, as he dropped his face into her hair and inhaled before sitting down.

“What are you doing?” she asked in confusion.

“Smelling the real you. Only two students brewed it correctly so I spent the last couple hours smelling the essence of you mixed with all sorts of other foul things. It was horrifying.”

Hermione chuckled a little at this.

“I’m also here to collect you. You’ve eaten?”

She nodded, and he held his hand out to pull her away from the table. Hermione followed him curiously, oddly nervous for whatever he had planned.

He started to lead her toward a familiar corridor before stopping in front of a blank stretch of wall and walking in front of it three times. When the door materialized he just looked at her and smirked before pulling it open.

Hermione gasped as she walked in. It was the piano room, but it was filled with candles and Hermione saw a blanket on the floor with some pillows and champagne and what looked like the house elves’ chocolate mousse she favored so much.

“So I think it’s time we’re honest with each other about something,” he said as he walked in.

Hermione glanced at him a bit cautiously.

“I heard from a little black cat that you’ve been following me in here and listening to me play all year.”

Hermione blushed deeply, but to her relief he didn’t seem angry with her, just amused.

“Did I tell you this when I was strung out on that pain potion then?”

“Mmmm you may have confirmed it for me,” he said, as he pulled her over to the piano. “I also heard a rumor that it turns you on. But cats can’t have orgasms.”

“Oh God,” moaned Hermione, totally mortified now.

But then she just realized what he said.

“I’ve only told *one* person that! You eavesdropped on my conversation with Ginny didn’t you!”

He looked totally unabashed. “I needed an unbiased review of our first date. I had no idea you would be sharing... that.”

“It was our second date,” she automatically corrected him.

He just rolled his eyes at her. “Whatever. Point is, I’ll admit I did eavesdrop. It was only the one time though. You’ve been spying all year.”

Hermione blushed deeply at this, but said nothing more. She supposed he had a point. She couldn’t be *that* made at him for one time when she had been doing it to him all year.

Again he just laughed at the look on her face as he waved his wand and expanded the piano bench so there was room for both of them. She sighed as she slid onto the bench next to him.

“You should have just told me you get off on it,” he said, nudging her. “I would have brought you in here ages ago.”

Hermione gave him a small smile. “I can’t believe nobody else knows this about you.”

He shrugged. “It’s not a secret. It’s just one of those things that was always mine. It helps me process things.”

Hermione nodded in understanding as he put his fingers to the keys and began to play.

“My funny valentine...”

Hermione was lost in the music and his voice. It was different hearing it like this, right next to him, knowing he was actually singing *to* her for once.

Then he shifted to another song.

“Nighttime sharpens, heightens each sensation...”

God this should not be as hot as it was. But she knew she was a sucker for his hands and voice. It was why she had been following him all year.

The last few notes ended and Hermione couldn’t help herself. She turned into him and started kissing his neck. She felt a frisson of awareness come from him, but he didn’t stop playing.

“I see trees of green, red roses too...”

Why was he still playing when she just wanted to jump him? Hermione tried kissing his neck again and snaking her hands toward his pants, but still he didn't stop.

“Tale as old as time...”

Alright, he was singing her favorite song from her favorite animated movie ever, and that was a power move right there. Her knickers were officially soaked.

As he reached the final notes Hermione stood and flung herself into his lap so she was straddling him.

He laughed as she leaned down and kissed him frantically.

“How did you manage this as a cat then? I always played a lot longer than that,” he said, as he let her kiss all over him.

“Cats have less complex feelings. But this is just... oh God.”

She felt his hands come around to grip her arse as he let her kiss him deeply, and then he pulled her to him tightly and stood up. Instinctively Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist, and he walked them over to the blanket, where he lowered her onto it. He disentangled himself for a moment to pour her some champagne and snatch a glass filled with mousse, and he handed both to her as he settled himself behind her and pulled her back against his chest.

“Have a drink. Eat some dessert.”

Hermione gave a contented sigh as she took a sip.

“This is very nice,” she said, eyeing the champagne appreciatively.

“I don't buy shitty champagne.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but smiled at this. “Shitty or not, it always goes straight to my head after a couple glasses. I do love it though.”

“That's what Sully told me,” he said simply.

She turned around to give him a suspicious look. “What else has Sully told you?”

“Oh any number of things. Like the fact that the ranunculus that will be filling your room tonight are your favorite flower.”

Hermione's eyes widened. “You found ranunculus in February?”

“I imported them. I got a special price if I bought them in bulk so you can expect quite the display when we get back. The house elves were busy getting it all set up when I left to get you from dinner.”

Hermione felt herself blush as she leaned in and kissed him again.

“You’re too much sometimes.”

“I want to give you things,” he said quietly. “Anything. Everything.”

“I had no idea you were such a generous person,” she said. “Before all this I mean.”

“I’m not usually. Just with you.”

Hermione turned to face him. “Why though? What makes me so different?”

He just raised an eyebrow. “That’s the million galleon question isn’t it? I don’t know why exactly. I know you’re brilliant, and I love to spend time with you. You’re funny and sharp, and you keep me on my toes. You’re obviously beautiful. And I think you understand me a lot better than other witches do. We were on opposite sides of the war, but we both saw awful things and did awful things and had awful things happen to us. How can I explain what that’s like? I can’t. But I don’t have to try to explain it to you.”

Hermione felt her heart swelling, and she leaned into him. She felt him kiss the top of her head as he spoke again.

“I don’t know, Hermione. I just love everything about this. I’m terrified I’m going to fuck it up somehow, and that would just... well I think it would wreck me. So yeah, I’m generous with you because I want to be, and I have the means to do it. It’s nothing less than you deserve, and if I can’t step up and be that kind of wizard for you then I’m not worthy of your affection. And you also have to understand... From my perspective, when I see you light up and enjoy the things I can give you... it’s one of the best feelings in the world.”

Hermione was nearly overcome by emotion. “This doesn’t feel like my life,” she said quietly.

“It is your life. And it’s going to be your life for as long as you’ll let me be in it. I look at you, and I see years of this if you’ll have me.”

Hermione’s heart was bursting. “You’re serious?” she whispered.

“I’ve never been more serious about anything,” he said.

Hermione drained her glass and then turned to climb into Draco’s lap. She was kissing him deeply, and he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him.

“I want you,” she whispered. “So much...”

“I want you too. More than anything. And I’m definitely going to have you. But first I thought we might try something. It’s a little different.”

Hermione pulled back in confusion. “Like what?”

He just looked at her. “Do you trust me?”

Hermione felt a swoop in her stomach and nodded slowly.

“Then let’s go back to your room. I think you’ll be more comfortable in there this first time.”

Hermione’s heart was pounding, but she allowed him to pull her to her feet and lead her out of the room. She cast a glance back at the piano as they left, but she felt Draco squeeze her hand, and instinctively she followed. He led her in silence through the halls until they reached the staff common room. He muttered the password and didn’t let go as he pulled her through. They just nodded to a couple of stragglers who gave them knowing looks as Draco pulled her down the hallway to her room.

He opened the door and they stepped through, and Hermione came to a halt as she gasped and spun around. Every surface of her room was covered in ranunculus, in a riot of color: pinks, reds, yellows, whites, oranges, and even purples and greens. He had told her he placed a bulk order, but there were *hundreds* of them. She had never seen so many in her life. She just turned back to stare at Draco in amazement. He wasn’t looking at the flowers, but seemed to be studying her reaction to them, a small smile lingering around his mouth.

“Thank you,” she said suddenly. “Oh these are just so beautiful...” and she approached the nearest vase and touched one of them gently. She felt an odd longing as she looked at them. She had always loved these more than anything. Her cousin had used them in her wedding bouquet when Hermione was eight, and she had fallen in love with them that very day. She had always thought ranunculus looked very romantic and also incredibly happy. It was the perfect flower.

Draco had wandered up behind her. “I’m glad you like them. I had never heard of them before, but when I saw them... I think they’re a bit like you, in flower form. So many layers, so many colors. Both soft and feminine and also adventurous and a little wild. They’re perfect for you.”

Hermione melted at this and turned to kiss him. He kissed her back, and Hermione was surprised by how gentle he was being. But then she felt his hand come up to her blouse and start to unbutton it.

“You’re ready to try something new then?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” she nodded.

He slipped her blouse off her shoulders and moved to the zipper of her skirt.

“Alright then I want you to think of a safe word.”

Hermione inhaled. *A safe word?*

“Is it going... to hurt?” she whispered, suddenly very nervous. She didn’t know much about this sort of thing, but she knew some couples liked pain. She knew she had a high pain tolerance, but it had always been associated with dueling and war for her. She didn’t want Draco to hurt her.

“No,” he said quickly. “I’m not into pain and punishment. But what we’re going to do tonight can get a little intense. And if you need a break or you need me to stop, you can use your word.”

It’s just a backup plan then, she thought with relief. Hermione felt herself relax a bit, and she thought Draco sensed it too because he leaned back into her to kiss her shoulder gently as he nudged her bra strap down.

“Alright then. How about Crookshanks?”

He pulled back and gave her an odd look. She shrugged. “I used to have a cat named Crookshanks.”

He nodded at this. “That works then. You’ll be able to remember it. Alright, let’s get you completely naked, beautiful and then onto the bed.”

She was nearly naked already, but she slipped off her bra and let him pull her knickers down, which were one of the prettier pairs Hermione owned. To her surprise he smirked when he saw them and tucked them into his pocket. “These are mine until further notice.”

She cast him a questioning look, but he didn’t explain himself, so she slowly made her way to the bed. Only now did she realize he was still fully clothed, though she saw a bulge in his pants that told her he was hard. For some reason the fact that he was dressed and she was naked made her core dampen. He was in control, even more so than usual tonight.

“Lay down on your back, princess. Spread eagle for me. I’m going to tie you down.”

Hermione inhaled. Her heart started to pound, but she thought about it for a moment and decided she trusted him. She was incredibly nervous, but something about it also made her unbearably excited. He let her get her bearings as she slowed her breathing and then laid back down, spreading her arms and legs open.

Without saying a word, he lifted his wand and pointed it to her, and silk bindings sprang out of it, tying each limb to one of the four corners of the bed.

“Test them for me,” he said quietly.

Hermione pulled a bit, and she saw him study them. He raised his wand again and tightened her arms just a bit.

“Ok so far?” he asked gently.

She nodded.

“Words, mon coeur. It’s important for something like this.”

“I... yes. I’m ok.”

He nodded with satisfaction. “Last thing then, if you’re willing.... a blindfold.”

Hermione's eyes widened, but then automatically closed as she tried to center herself. Then she realized she had just closed them anyway, and it might be easier for her to get through this first time if she only had to focus on feeling it. She nodded and said, "OK."

A moment later she felt something soft tighten around her eyes.

"Can you see through it?" Draco's voice asked softly.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Perfect. Then I want you to relax just like that, pretty girl. I'm going to stand here and look at every inch of you before we get started. That is *my* Valentine's gift."

Hermione felt herself flush and her core dampen. Somehow she knew he was watching it. He had a sixth sense when it came to that sort of thing. And sure enough, she heard the unmistakable sound of his belt unbuckling. She knew he was touching himself while he looked at her, as he often liked to do.

With the blindfold on and her hands and feet secured, Hermione felt the opposite of relaxed. In fact, her senses started straining for some indication of what was about to happen. But other than that noise of his belt, he was perfectly silent. She could sense his eyes burning into her, but she had lost his location in the room. It made her feel totally exposed, unsure if he was looking at her from the left or right, top or bottom. Was he looking at her breasts or between her legs? He usually told her, but he wasn't saying anything at all right now, and it was sending her imagination into overdrive.

Feeling some need to ground herself, Hermione arched just a bit.

There, she thought. *He saw me do that. He's looking at my nipples.*

This thought then made her folds glisten, and strained to present it to him.

He's looking down there now, she thought.

In trying to orient herself she was supplicating to him, and this had the effect of turning her on even more.

Why hasn't he started yet?

She had to have been laying here for nearly ten minutes at this point, just giving him an eyeful while he looked at her. She started to quiver in anticipation, waiting for something, *anything* to happen.

Suddenly she felt hot air ghost across her left breast, and Hermione nearly seized at the sensation. It was coming from the opposite side from where he had started. He must have walked around the bed without making a sound. She strained at her bindings to try to move closer to him, but the air was gone, and now nothing.

Another full minute ticked by, and Hermione felt herself start to quiver as she waited. Then she felt his tongue flick her other nipple, and she arched toward him the other way, but he

was gone again.

Hermione was breathing hard now. He had barely touched her, and she was already desperate for him. Her senses were in overdrive, as her body sought his mouth, his touch, just *anything* from him.

She heard him inhale, and the sound was coming from around her core. It sounded like he was breathing her in. She wriggled her hips, desperate to get a feel, but she couldn't find him.

“Draco... please...” she murmured. “I need you. I'll do *anything*...”

At that, the most curious buzzing filled the room, and Hermione started to shake. Somehow — and she wasn't quite sure how — he had found her vibrator.

Chapter 18: Ties

Chapter Notes

TW: Discussion of fertility issues

Draco

Draco had Hermione Granger exactly where he wanted her. He had been wanting to do this with her ever since that first night he had her, but he had bided his time until he learned more about her first. She was sexually inexperienced compared to him, and he didn't want to scare her away by showing her his kinks too quickly.

As he studied her in their encounters together it soon became clear to him that she was naturally submissive during sex. She liked it, she got off on it, and Salazar help him but he got off on being dominant. It wasn't something he necessarily needed to enjoy sex. Before their first encounter he hadn't expected her to behave that way, and he had been perfectly content with that. But once he had identified it, he knew he'd be the luckiest bloke in the world if he could coax it out of her.

He had never named that dynamic for her, wanting her to discover it for herself and at her own pace. Every other submissive he had ever bedded had already known it about herself and clearly told Draco what she wanted. Draco had become a bit known for his dominant tendencies, much to his chagrin. As whispers about him made their rounds in pureblood circles, many of the witches who wanted it that way sought him out, at least until Draco put the kibosh on his own sexual exploits.

But Hermione was different from any witch he had ever had like this. She was a sexual submissive who was dominant outside of the bedroom. The side of herself that she presented to the world had been shaped by war and prejudice, and she tried to be strong because of it. And unlike every other witch he had bedded, she had been brutally tortured. She had been severely injured. So he had to be absolutely sure he was right about it and proceed very slowly to get her to open up to him before he tried anything like this.

He had even talked to Healer Robinson about it, who warned Draco that things like binding could trigger a panic attack if he wasn't careful. Hermione probably had some post traumatic stress. She certainly had nightmares, even if they were improving. He told Draco that whether Hermione had submissive tendencies or not, she may not like being restrained because it would make her powerless, and she had a history of being tortured when she was that powerless. He told Draco to pay close attention to her reactions and build up to it slowly, stopping whenever she became uncomfortable. She had to trust him implicitly first, and Draco had to be prepared for it to go very badly if he gauged it wrong.

So Draco had spent a month and a half of watching her open for him, pushing her just a bit, and slowly teaching her to trust him during the ample amounts of sex they had together. He finally decided she was ready, though he had still been nervous about it. But what better day than Valentine's Day to try something like this? He sensed that if he did it right and made sure she was as comfortable as she could be during her first time, it would deepen their relationship. She would trust him with her body in a way she had never trusted anybody before, and he would reward her trust with exquisite pleasure.

After he bound and blindfolded her, he had spent the better part of fifteen minutes masturbating slowly, as he watched her quivering in anticipation for him. He had never taken his time like this with another witch before, and it had been absolutely fascinating to study her. He had cast a couple of silencing charms around himself after he unbuckled his pants so she couldn't hear him. But he could clearly see and hear everything that was happening to her. Every bit of her was flushed. Her nipples had tightened with no stimulation at all, and her core was damp and becoming sodden as she waited. Her breathing had gotten shallow, settling into fast pants, and her fingers and toes were reflexively tightening and loosening as she tried to anchor herself. Then she arched a little, which naturally drew his gaze to her tits, before watching in delight as she glistened more brightly than ever.

Her reactions to the hot air and soft lick had been perfect. She jolted so hard he could tell that he had shocked her. But both times she arched toward him instead of shrinking away, and he knew she was ready to do this with him. He hadn't misjudged.

He canceled the silencing charm and leaned in to inhale his favorite scent in the world. He didn't tell her this, but the amortentia he smelled earlier that day wasn't just citrus and floral. It was also salt and musk — the smell of her sex. He had been craving it all afternoon and evening, having gotten nearly drunk on the smell of it from his own cauldron. But Draco had also been forced to smell other things from the students that weren't nearly so pleasant, so getting this unadulterated whiff of her now settled something deep inside of him. She was here. She was real.

She heard him and tried to lift her bum to connect to his face. It was all he could do not to give a wicked chuckle at her attempts. He fully intended to eat her out, but not quite yet. He was trying hard to Savor.

Patience my lovely one.

But then she actually begged him for it. And Draco decided to give his witch a little of what she desperately wanted now.

He pulled out the magical vibrator he had discovered in her nightstand after she confessed to her stash of toys and turned it on. The sound of it had the most interesting effect on her. She started to shake and jerk, even though he hadn't even touched her yet.

He had to admit he had never used toys before. His previous encounters — even the ones in which he tied the witch down — had been too casual and spontaneous for this kind of advanced planning and reconnaissance. He was now intensely curious himself as he watched her have an almost Pavlovian response to the sound it was making.

He touched one nipple with it, and she arched and moaned and wriggled her hips aggressively.

Fucking hell.

He did it again, this time dragging it across her entire left breast. She groaned and then tried to turn to the side so he could do it to her right breast too.

Not so fast princess.

For her right side he hovered over her and pulled her breast into his mouth for a long, hard suck, and she made a desperate, incoherent sound.

Seized with inspiration, he moved the vibrator off her breasts and placed it on the bed several inches from her core.

“Oh God,” she said as she felt the mattress vibrating now, but just out of reach of where she really wanted it.

“Draco... please... I need you so much...”

“What do you want mon coeur?”

“Your cock... please, give me your cock...”

Draco raised an eyebrow. She had never been quite that clear with him. She was learning to use her words. Good.

“Ah, but you see darling, right now my cock is otherwise occupied by my hand. And I need you to be good for a little longer before I give it to you.”

“To vibrator then... I need it... I’m good... I’ll be *so* good... please...”

“Good girls are patient. Good girls let me take my time. Do you know how perfect you look? Do you have any idea how many fantasies you’re fulfilling for me right now? I’ve wanted you naked and tied down like this for ages.”

She bit her lip and groaned.

“Just like that...” he coaxed. “I can see that pretty cunt is so ready for me. I know you want me to fill you up. You take me in so good, and you’re empty right now. You were made to be filled with my cock.”

“Yes... oh *God*, yes...”

“Mmmm maybe a taste then.”

She wriggled her hips hard, clearly thrilled he was about to fuck her. But instead he climbed on the bed and leaned down over the vibrator and licked.

Her hips bucked so hard at the contact he was forced to grab them and hold her down. She made a keening sound as he pulled back.

“Please Draco, I need to come... I’m so close already... I want you to make me come.”

Give the lady what she wants.

Draco buried his face into her and started to suck, and in under ten seconds she was shattering for him and thrashing as she did it. It had to be a new personal record for him as he lifted his head to find her arms straining against the bindings as she arched.

Now that you’ve started I’m not going to let you stop.

This was part of his plan too. He wanted to overlap her orgasms so that she hardly knew where one ended and the next began.

He grasped the vibrator, and he could tell she felt that he had moved it. He traced it around her core, and she was going wild now trying to get it inside of her, but he kept it just out of reach until...

He pressed it lightly into her clit, and she exploded.

Fucking hell this thing is brilliant.

For the first time Draco understood why she thought she could be sexually satisfied for the rest of her adult life with a toy instead of a wizard to fill her. It sent her already overly sensitive body into overdrive, and she looked totally lost as she convulsed.

“So... intense...” she gasped.

At these words Draco straightened up a bit to look at her critically. She was flushed, and her fingers were grasping at air, but she seemed to be holding it together. Satisfied that she was still OK, he swirled the vibrator around the edge of her opening to give her the shortest of breaks.

“Please...” she whimpered. “Draco.... I’ll do anything...”

Draco suddenly had a brainwave. She was prepared to negotiate, and he knew exactly what he wanted from her.

“Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” she said instantly. “Nobody else’s.”

“And in the future? Do you see a future with me mon coeur?”

“Yes... I don’t think I could be anybody else’s ever again...”

That was enough to make the beast inside of Draco roar with satisfaction. He was desperate to claim her now, to imprint himself onto her body so thoroughly that the whole fucking

world would know it and every other wizard would stay the hell away from her. She was his. She would never be anybody else's.

He waved his wand and vanished his clothes as he picked up the vibrator and swirled it around her one more time. She was straining again, desperate to see if she had been good enough, if she had said the right things.

One more like this, and then I'll fuck her until she's incoherent.

He finally slotted the vibrator inside of her, and she went wild. Draco lifted his wand to reinforce the bindings as she bore down on it and rode it.

"Fuck..." he breathed as he watched her in awe. He just held it in place for her, and she did all the work as she ground on it, her hips pumping fast to take what she needed.

"Fucking go, pretty girl, I've got you..."

Hermione moaned and came with another shout, and this time Draco didn't pause. He wrenched the vibrator from her as he rammed his cock inside of her instead. She gasped and arched for him as he started to pound her.

"Yes... oh God just like that.... Yes..." she groaned.

Draco wasn't holding back at all. The very bed was shaking as he thrust as hard and fast as he could. He felt his balls slapping against her, and she suddenly started to break again.

"More..." he gasped. "I want more..."

Before her orgasm was over, he leaned back and grabbed the vibrator and pressed down on her clit. He continued to rock as hard as he could with the slightly changed angle. She made a strangled sound as she convulsed, and Draco himself was ready to erupt too.

He hung on as long as he could, sending her spiraling into her aftershocks. He gave her no break as he continued to press down with the vibrator against her clit, until he couldn't hold it any longer and his own orgasm exploded out of him.

He pumped himself dry into her body before removing the vibrator and turning it off and then gently slipped himself out of her. He pulled back to look at her, and he could see she was still twitching.

"Darling..." he said.

She didn't respond or acknowledge him at all. Draco narrowed his eyes as he studied her intently.

"Hermione," he said more firmly.

Still nothing. He settled against her and placed his hand on her stomach, and she convulsed again and made a whimpering sound. He pulled his hand away, staring down at her with some surprise. Had she actually gone into that hazy place? He had brought a couple other

witches there before, but never on a first try. Then again, he had never studied another witch like he studied Hermione.

He narrowed his eyes to assess her. She still wasn't talking, but he could see she was breathing. And clearly she wasn't unconscious. Feeling more certain now he tried flicking her nipple, and she arched and moaned and started to shatter again.

"Holy fuck, she did..." he muttered to himself.

She was still shaking and so hypersensitive that his barest touch was sending her careening.

He swiped against her core, and again she started to thrash and pump her hips against nothing at all.

"More?" he said in slight disbelief.

A bit incredulous now, Draco turned and reached for the vibrator again but didn't turn it on. She might *actually* pass out if he did that. He still hadn't cleaned her up yet, but he placed it inside of her anyway and pressed up gently, and Hermione lost all sense of control. She was pumping hard, gasping for breath, and moaning again, and some distant warning bell in Draco's brain went off as he watched her. She was so far gone she didn't even know what she was doing or where she was. He doubted she would have the presence of mind to use her safe word if she needed it.

He slipped the vibrator back out, and she was whimpering again and trembling.

"Enough love," he whispered. "That's enough. No more until you come back to me."

He waved his wand and released her bindings, and she just laid there, unmoving except for tiny aftershocks rippling through her. He gently pulled the blindfold off of her, and she showed the first real signs of life as she squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head toward him, but she still didn't say anything as she just gave a little sigh.

He reached for his wand to vanish the mess and then paused. He lifted himself up a bit to see his seed smeared on her thighs, and something in him gloried in it. She was all his like this. No other man's seed had been in her for years.

As he waited for her to join the land of the living again, he gently rubbed her wrists and arms while he studied that slightly purple scar on her abdomen. He had seen it many times now, but as he watched his spend start to dry on her, he was struck more strongly than ever that he wished Dolohov were dead. Like many of the former Death Eaters, including his father, Dolohov's case was going through an extended appeals process right now. Draco was sure his appeal would fail, but he couldn't help but follow it obsessively in the papers. He didn't know what he would do if that bastard were actually released.

It was all due to Hermione of course. He didn't know why it had happened this way, but the disappointment he had felt when he first found out she wasn't actually pregnant had made him become fixated on the idea. And now he hated Dolohov more than anybody else on this earth for what he had done to her to threaten that dream.

It took him a couple weeks, but he eventually accepted and acknowledged the uncomfortable truth that wanted Hermione to bear his heir.

He felt guilty for the thought, and he found he couldn't even Savor it. But it was true. A year ago he would have been satisfied to see the title go to Teddy Lupin or Teddy's son. But now that he had found Hermione, he actually agreed with his mother about the title for the first time since he was a preteen. It would be *his* title when Lucius died, and it should go through *his* line, and fuck it all but he wanted it to be with this witch.

He knew he wouldn't end things with her if she couldn't have children. He cared about her far too much for that. But he also thought his heart might break if it didn't happen someday, and Dolohov had tried to take it away from him.

And of *course* the witch he picked was a hobby duelist. And of *course* her dueling partner was Harry fucking Potter. And of *course* their duels embodied everything about Gryffindors that drove him mad. They were actually fucking insane with their rules about total incapacity and all spells go but *Avada Kedavra*. It was true that watching her duel Potter was ridiculously hot, and it never failed to turn him on. But it also set his nerves on edge whenever he watched Potter send *sectumsempra* straight to her abdomen. He found less and less Joy in it as the weeks moved on.

Every time she was hit during her duels with Potter, and especially when she was hit in the stomach, Draco felt almost frantic as he wondered if maybe she had lost her fertility for good this time. He learned that she and Potter were both rather adept at field healing, but once the dueling club meeting was over he would always haul her to Poppy for a real, professional look. And once they were there, he couldn't help but pull Poppy aside and question her intently about Hermione's condition.

Poppy, of course, wouldn't talk about Hermione's medical history with him directly. She told him, "Hermione doesn't have a husband yet," with a very pointed look. But perhaps she could see the frantic worry in Draco's eyes, because she did consent to answer questions for him at a high level.

"Hypothetically, does a witch really only need one tube to have children?"

"Hypothetically, how much longer does it take with one versus two?"

"Hypothetically, is Narcissa right about magical pregnancies taking a while to stick or was she just generalizing from her own experience?"

"Hypothetically, can a condition like this be healed the magical way? What about the muggle way?"

"Hypothetically, would it make a pregnancy high risk?"

Draco had about a thousand questions. And it seemed like he thought of more questions every time he saw Poppy when he dragged Hermione in for her now-weekly post-dueling check up.

Poppy was patient and answered his questions as best as she could, and eventually Draco was satisfied that Hermione probably could have children as long as she didn't lose the other tube too. And that was why watching her duel Potter gave him both a raging hard on and an anxiety attack week after week.

A growing part of him really wished she would stop doing it, but he couldn't ask her to stop without telling her *why*. And raising the topic with her certainly wasn't easy.

He knew that even though she spoke rather clearly to him that night, she remembered almost nothing of their conversation after her first duel with Potter. The pain potion he gave her was still experimental, and he made notes about that odd side effect. But the fact of the matter was she didn't seem to recall what she had told him, and she also hadn't asked him about it directly. So he really wasn't sure how to tell her that he wanted her to be the mother of his children. It seemed a bit fast, and he wasn't certain if her apparent willingness that night was real or a byproduct of the pain potion.

When she asked for her next dose of contraception he had internally sighed as he gave it to her, and he questioned the truth of her statements that night she was under the influence more than ever. He would never actually tamper with her potion, but he harbored some indistinct dreams of her throwing herself into his arms and telling him she wanted to have children as soon as possible. Or maybe she would just forget to take it one month, and there would be an accident. If she ever fulfilled either of those fantasies for him, Draco would be thrilled. He knew he was fucking ridiculous, but he couldn't help himself but dream.

And yet, the guilt he felt about these dreams were making it more and more difficult for him to Savor. He could do it in the moment, and he *had* Savored while he was inside of her just now. But as soon as their coupling was done his mind turned to those thoughts he really shouldn't be having. He wanted to skip to the fucking end already and sod the journey.

So no, he hadn't figured out how to tell her all of this yet. He had a hard enough time admitting it to himself. So he settled with the next best thing: making sure that she was here and she was his. He would take care of her. He would try to show her what she meant to him. And maybe, just maybe, she would develop those same dreams too. He had gotten closer tonight in telling her these things than he ever had before, but he still hadn't done it. Maybe like the sex, he could build up to it.

He sighed as he finally vanished the mess and then rubbed her arms to bring her back around to him. He was suddenly struck by another uncomfortable truth. It was something that had probably been coming for a while but that he had pointedly ignored it as he focused on other things instead.

He was in love with her. Of course he was. It was the only explanation for his behavior and all the things he now wished for.

Fuck it all, what do I do about it?

Hermione

Hermione had been floating in a wonderful place she had never visited before. She wasn't sure how long she had been here, but it was just lovely, and she was in no great rush to leave it.

She eventually became aware of strong, warm hands massaging her arms, as the feeling started to return to her limbs. It was odd how everything was tingling. It felt like her very skin was vibrating. She had no idea that was possible, and she wondered how exactly it had happened.

She felt herself stir just a bit, but she was still so relaxed she wasn't ready to open her eyes yet.

"There she is..." said a deep voice. "Come back to me when you're ready darling."

Hermione knew that voice. She was pretty sure that voice was the reason she had ended up here in the first place.

She still wasn't ready to open her eyes, but she turned her head toward the voice and sighed. She felt the arms that belonged to that voice gather her close, and then she was engulfed in a delicious male scent.

Draco.

Oh yes, Draco. Now she remembered. Draco had tied her down. Draco had driven her mad with need. Draco had made her come so many times she had lost count and might have even lost consciousness for a few seconds. She had certainly lost all sense of awareness.

It took so much effort, but finally her eyelids fluttered open to find him studying her face intently. His expression was an odd mix of concern, deep satisfaction, and something else she couldn't quite identify. It was soft though, and she instinctively warmed because of it.

"You did so well, mon coeur. You were so perfect. Did you like it?"

She nodded a bit shyly, and he raised an eyebrow. She knew what he was about to say.

Words, darling.

"Yes," she whispered.

He smiled a bit at this and kissed her forehead.

"Do you need anything? Water? A potion?"

She furrowed her brow as she thought about it. "Maybe some water," she said quietly. "And you."

He smiled at this and waved his wand to conjure a glass for her before filling it with water. She sat up a little and drank before he banished it and pulled her in close again.

She sighed deeply and found herself growing oddly emotional. It was the strangest thing, but she clung to him as everything they had just done finally seemed to hit her in earnest. She buried her face in his shoulder as tears pricked her eyes and a lump rose in her throat. He rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles.

“Shhh, you’re ok,” he whispered. “Let it out. It’s normal.”

She choked a bit, as a few tears leaked out.

Bloody hell, why am I crying after the best sex I’ve ever had?

It was totally bizarre and irrational. She had been blissfully happy just moments ago.

Maybe because you’re afraid of losing him, whispered a tiny, critical voice in her head. *You’re afraid he’s going to find some witch who does these things better than you.*

“How many times have you done that before?” she suddenly asked.

She felt him shift a bit, and she was sure he was looking down at her, but she couldn’t bring herself to make eye contact.

“Bondage in general? A fair number of times. Bondage like that? Once. Just now.”

She thought about this.

“So for you that was...” she trailed off.

“Fucking transcendent,” he said. “Unlike anything I’ve ever had before.”

Something inside of her relaxed a little, and the immediate need to cry seemed to pass, though she still felt emotionally vulnerable. She tried to look up at him but couldn’t. Still, she rather felt she owed him a bit of an explanation.

“I think I’m just afraid you’ll want somebody more experienced than me... somebody who actually knows what they hell they’re doing,” she said quietly. “That’s why I got emotional.”

He tilted her chin up and waited her out until she finally looked up at him.

“First, that’s never going to happen. I love exploring these things with you, and you’re the most responsive and lovely witch I’ve ever been with. I have no desire whatsoever to find somebody else. Second, the emotions are from the things we just did. It’s intense enough that it can give you a sort of high while it’s happening. Crashes afterwards are perfectly normal. My job is to help you through them.”

She felt a bit better now, but something still confused her a little bit. “Your... job?”

He nodded a little. “Yes, my job as your... partner. If I push you far enough to go to that place then I have to be willing to bring you back from it too. Crashes don’t bother me, love. It means I did it right.”

Hermione nodded as she fully relaxed into him. He continued to rub her back until he finally said, “So did you like it? Or do you wish it had gone differently?”

She thought about this. “It was the best thing I’ve ever done,” she finally said slowly. “It... well it blew my mind. I just didn’t expect to be so emotional afterwards.”

He nodded a bit. “I probably should have warned you. Sorry about that, I was a bit distracted by a gorgeous witch having back to back orgasms for me.”

She smiled a bit at this. “Well now I know for next time, don’t I?”

He grinned broadly. “I’m just bloody thrilled there will be a next time. I thought you would like it, but it’s a bit risky.”

“Risky has never stopped me,” she teased.

He gave her a long-suffering look. “Believe me, I’m aware. You and Potter drive me bloody mad with your duels.”

She furrowed her brow. “I thought you liked them?”

“It really turns me on. It also gives me a heart attack. I’m capable of feeling two things at once.”

She smiled a bit at this. “Despite our rules, Harry and I don’t use lethal curses that we can’t reverse. If he hit me full on with a *sectumsempra* or something I would pass out, he would win, and then he’d heal me before I actually died.”

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose at this and closed his eyes. “Darling, you know I love you, but please don’t ever say that to me again. Nothing about that inspires confidence.”

Hermione felt a jolt at what he just said, but he didn’t seem to notice anything odd about it.

It’s just an expression, she told herself firmly. I’ve told Harry and Ron and even George that I love them like that before. It just means he cares about me. He doesn’t mean it romantically.

Determined to push past it, Hermione forced herself to smile as she snuggled into him again. He pulled her close, and her mind began to wander back to the piano and the champagne and the flowers and the bondage and the vibrator...

Wait a second.

“How did you know about my vibrator?” she demanded.

He chuckled and gave her a wicked look. “You may have confessed to having a few toys when you were high as a kite on that pain potion. And I may have gone exploring once you told me where they were.”

Her jaw dropped, and he just started to laugh.

“Oh bloody hell,” she muttered.

“It’s brilliant, love,” he said. “I’ve never used toys on a witch before. It took things to another level.”

Hermione pulled back in surprise. “You’ve never used toys?”

He just shook his head. “It’s a bit intimate. My previous encounters weren’t that intimate.”

Hermione felt oddly proud that she had gotten one of his firsts. She had never been expecting that based on what she knew about him. But then something he had just said struck her as odd.

“You’ve done bondage before, and it wasn’t intimate?”

He shrugged. “Some witches sought it out from me. That doesn’t mean they wanted me for anything more than sex, money, and my title.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What kinds of witches? I always thought the wizarding world was rather conservative.”

“It is,” he assured you. “That’s why it took awhile for rumors about it to make it back to my mother. But you know casual sex happens. And some witches are more... submissive than others and enjoy that kind of thing.”

He seemed to hesitate as he said this last bit.

“Submissive,” she said.

He nodded slowly and stared at her intently as she thought about it.

Am I submissive? she wondered. *If I like that sort of thing too?*

Yes, said a small voice. *Yes you are, and he figured it out.*

Now she thought about her previous encounters with the few other blokes she had been with. Was this why sex with Draco was so much more intense? Had he keyed into something about her that the others had missed? There was no way Ron had figured it out. It might be something he would understand now as an adult, but they had gotten together just after the Battle of Hogwarts. They were both too young and inexperienced when they were together to have experimented in this way. Then the muggle blokes she had been with only involved a few dates, some decent shagging, and that was the end of it. None of them had put in the work to figure out what she really liked. But Draco had. And Draco had figured this out about her before she ever really understood it herself.

“So you’re dominant then,” she finally said.

He nodded again. “Yes. I trend dominant.”

She narrowed her eyes and then they widened. “Does this mean you want to... I don’t know... Use whips or something?”

He just laughed. “No, I already told you, I’m not really into pain and punishment. Some couples are, but the one time a witch asked me to choke her, I had a flashback to my Death Eater days. I couldn’t do it. The only punishments I give are teasing, edging, things like that. Nothing that’s actually painful.”

“So you just like....” she trailed off.

“Pleasure. Trying different things that feel good. And I don’t need submission from my partner to enjoy sex. Not at all. But I like it when it happens. You might call me dominant light.”

“Dominant light,” she said slowly.

“Yes. I don’t crave dominance in every aspect of my life like some doms do. There’s nothing wrong with that, but like anything there’s a scale. And I fall on the light end of the scale. My dominance is selective.”

Hermione felt like she was having some sort of revelation now.

“I think...” she said slowly. “I think maybe I’m submissive light.”

He inclined his head and looked very satisfied that she had figured this out. “I think you are, mon coeur. You’re not submissive at all outside of the bedroom. Quite the opposite, actually. But when we’re having sex you like to let go and have me lead. And that’s one reason why the sex is so good. Our preferences line up.”

She studied him for a minute. “Are there other reasons the sex is so good then?” she asked quietly. “Other than this dominant-submissive thing?”

He gave her a very intent look now, as though weighing what he wanted to say to that.

“I’d say the emotional connection. The... hopes and dreams. All the things we could do together. All of that makes the sex with you better than anything I’ve had with anybody else.”

Hermione felt like they were on the precipice of something now. And maybe, just maybe, if she pushed him one more time he would break down his walls and tell her.

“What kinds of hopes and dreams?” she whispered.

“I...” he started, and then he faltered. It was odd coming from him. He was usually so self-assured. He closed his eyes and tried again. “I just... I want a lot of things with you, Hermione. Things I haven’t even wanted in the abstract until recently. It’s... it’s a lot.”

She felt him brush her stomach with his thumb as he said this, and her heart seized.

Surely he didn't mean...

Hermione wondered if she had the courage to ask the question she needed to ask. Did he really mean what she thought he meant, or did he just touch her casually?

No, she didn't have the courage to ask him just yet. If she misunderstood, she would be positively mortified. And if she didn't misunderstand, then he was right that it was a lot, especially since there were things he didn't even know about her yet.

At least I'm pretty sure he doesn't know.

But suddenly all of his odd behaviors seemed to coalesce: his whispered conversations with Poppy, his obsession with news of the Death Eaters, the odd looks and wistfulness she sensed from him...

Oh God, what if he does know? Apparently I told him all sorts of things when I was on that pain potion of his.

She forced herself not to panic. If he knew, did he also understand that she was *fine*? Or did he assume she would never be able to give him what he would need someday thanks to his position and family's title?

Should I even be concerned about it? Could he really be having those dreams?

She was forced to admit that she had idly dreamed of "forgetting" her potion once or twice. She had never confessed this to him, and she would never actually do it. He trusted her to take it, so obviously she would. But if she had dreamed about it, would it be so surprising if he had dreamed about it too? And if he had dreamed it, why shouldn't he worry about it if he knew her secret? Surely he wasn't as familiar with her anatomy as she was. And he was in line for a title. He might not care *now*, but he would care someday.

God but this really *was* a lot. And it was too much coming off of the emotional rollercoaster she had had this evening. She needed more time to think about it.

She had been quiet for a long time, and she realized he was looking at her nervously now. She settled into a reassuring smile, and she saw a look of relief cross his face.

"I want a lot of things too," she said quietly. "And you're right that it's a lot. There's no rush to sort through all of it just yet. I'm just glad we're together. And I'm glad the sex is amazing."

He gave her a slow smile, and pulled her in close.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Hermione," he said.

"Happy Valentine's Day," she replied.

Oh God, I probably love you.

Chapter 19: Thief

Draco

“I am so fucking fucked,” he said as he stepped through the floo.

“Hello to you too, Draco,” said Healer Robinson with amusement. “Drink?”

Draco just nodded and moved to the small cabinet where he knew Healer Robinson kept his stash to help himself.

“Nice selection,” he muttered.

“You gave it to me,” retorted Healer Robinson.

Draco inclined his head in acknowledgment. He started to pace as he sipped.

“Sit down Draco. And tell me what’s bothering you.”

Draco flung himself into a seat.

“I’m in love with Hermione,” he said.

Healer Robinson’s eyebrows flew up.

“You’re certain?”

Draco just nodded.

“And why is that a problem?”

Draco gave him an overwhelmed look. “How the fuck am I supposed to tell her that? What if she doesn’t feel the same way? I mean, I can’t tell her I’m fantasizing about getting her pregnant can I? How the fuck am I supposed to Savor everything when I feel like this?”

Healer Robinson’s eyes narrowed.

“Let’s back up. You’re fantasizing about getting her pregnant? Do you have the means to actually do it?”

“I’m brewing her contraception potion for her.”

To Healer Robinson’s credit he didn’t flinch. “I assume you haven’t tampered with it.”

“No,” said Draco. “But I keep hoping she’ll... I don’t know. Forget to take it. Or tell me she doesn’t want to take it.”

Healer Robinson nodded at this. “Alright. That’s a bit of an unusual fantasy for somebody who has been in a relationship for a few months, though some couples do move faster than others.”

“Why can’t I stop thinking about it, though?”

“Why do you think?”

Draco sighed. “I think it’s because she lost a fallopian tube in fifth year. She was fighting Death Eaters, and Dolohov tried to sterilize her. She can still have kids, but she’s down one tube. And I learned this right after she dueled Harry Potter for the first time during dueling club, and she got injured enough that she felt the need to check to make sure the other one was fine. Potter still comes to Hogwarts each week, and they exhibition duel for the students. They are fucking insane, and I’m scared she’s going to lose the other tube every time I watch.”

Healer Robinson blinked rapidly. “OK there is a lot to unpack there, but let’s start with the easy question. Why are you so scared she’s going to lose the other one? That would be really unusual in a duel.”

“Because they duel until one of them passes out. They allow all spells except *Avada Kedavra*, and they send potentially lethal spells to each other all the time. The students think it’s amazing, but it’s fucking mental.”

“Merlin,” he muttered, as he furrowed his brow to think about it.

“Right. And don’t get me wrong, it’s really fucking hot when she duels, especially when she wipes the floor with Potter. But it also terrifies me. I know Potter wouldn’t actually let her die, but every time she gets hit in the stomach I worry I’m never going to get an heir. I think it’s making me obsessed, and I can’t stop thinking about it. I wasn’t going to tell you about it because I know I’m fucking crazy, but it’s been weeks now, and I don’t know how to handle it.”

At this Healer Robinson sat back. “I thought you didn’t care about the title.”

“I didn’t, until Hermione. But now I want an heir.”

“You want an heir soon?”

“Well not right away. But if I had an heir show up nine months from now I wouldn’t hate it.”

Healer Robinson cast him an amused look at this.

“Draco, I don’t pretend to understand all the legalities of your title and the entailments with the Malfoy estate. But I am pretty sure that any baby of yours is only an heir if you’re married to its mother when it’s born.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Draco said. “Bastards can’t inherit. And it’s entailed on the male line, but Malfoys always produce boys so that part’s not an issue.”

Healer Robinson raised an eyebrow at this. “Setting aside the biological impossibility of that last statement you made, it does mean you would need to marry Hermione first.”

Draco just nodded. Obviously he would marry her.

“Does Hermione want to get married?” he pressed.

“I...” Draco paused and furrowed his brow. It had seemed so obvious to him that he would just marry her if she got pregnant that he hadn’t even considered that she might not agree to it.

Oh fuck.

Healer Robinson must have seen the sudden panic on Draco’s face. “It seems to me,” he said slowly, “that you’re getting a little ahead of yourself. You’re in love with her. That’s fantastic, and I’m proud of you for having the ability to identify that within yourself. That shows a lot of growth. But I think that is the thing you need to focus on... tell her you love her and want a future with her. Then if she responds in kind you can worry about marriage and then babies later on. You’re both young.”

“But it can take longer for her to get pregnant,” he countered, “given her condition.”

Healer Robinson inclined his head. “That may be true, but she has many fertile years left Draco. You should do this one step at a time.”

“How do I stop thinking about babies then? I mean, it’s practically become an intrusive thought at this point. I want to be Savoring and finding Joy and all that bullshit, and this is making it very hard.”

Healer Robinson frowned. “What do you mean?”

“All that stuff you said before I asked her out the first time,” retorted Draco. “About enjoying the journey and savoring the moments. I’m trying. And I was doing a really good job of it before I learned about her tubes. But now I can’t Savor. I just want to skip to the end and get my fucking heir. So how do I stop thinking about it so I can Savor again?”

Healer Robinson contemplated Draco for a long moment as he thought about this.

“You may not be able to stop thinking about it entirely,” he said slowly. “You’ve been primed to think about children and heirs from the cradle. It’s the way you were raised. And while it’s true you had lost interest in it for a time, now you’re thinking about it again. What I’m hearing though, is that you’re thinking about it because you’re in love with this witch. You don’t just want an heir. You want an heir because you want *her*. I think that’s healthy — it’s certainly far healthier than deciding to bring a child into this world for the sole purpose of lineage. But you also shouldn’t get so far ahead of yourself that you’re tempted to mess with her potion and get her pregnant before the two of you have ever talked about it. Not only would that be a massive violation of trust, but it creates real complexities. Children certainly don’t have to be produced in wedlock in the abstract, but for your title they *do*. And it takes two consenting adults to get married, Draco, not just one. You can dream about getting

married and having children with her. But you should find a way to tell her about those dreams and get her input first. Once you know you're on the same page with her you might be able to find joy in the journey again."

Draco was feeling overwhelmed, and he dropped his head into his hands.

"I tried to tell her on Valentine's Day. I had the perfect opportunity, and I blew it."

Healer Robinson gave him a sympathetic look. "It won't be the only chance you get."

Draco felt miserable. "But what if I tell her, and it's too much for her? What if she doesn't feel the same way?"

Healer Robinson narrowed his eyes. "That's always a risk," he said slowly. "And it's one of the most emotionally vulnerable moments you will ever have. You can't know for sure how she will react to it. But let me give you my observations as an objective third party who only knows her via reputation."

Draco nodded and listened intently.

"I know she's brilliant. Possibly a genius. The term 'Brightest Witch of the Age' comes to mind."

Draco nodded again, a bit unsure of where he was going with this.

"That means she's not stupid. She must know where a relationship with you could lead. She's surrounded by people getting married and having kids. It's bound to be on her mind. And given who *you* are and the fact that you're in line for a title, she would have to be an idiot not to at least consider it. She's no idiot."

Draco bit his lip as he contemplated this.

"I also know she's very loyal to the people she loves," said Healer Robinson. "When she gives her allegiance to somebody she will literally fight a war by their side. She will obliterate her parents. She will break laws and put her life on the line for them. She's no stranger to making difficult decisions or hearing shocking news about the people she cares about."

Draco furrowed his brow. "Obviously she's loyal to Potter. And I know he's one of your patients now. He told me."

Healer Robinson inclined his head. "And you also know I can't talk about my patients. But I will say that the myriad of things Harry has told her over the years are vastly more shocking than hearing that her boyfriend is in love with her and might want to marry her and have kids someday. She may not be as emotionally invested in the relationship as you are just yet, but she's made of really strong stuff. If Harry didn't scare her off, somehow I don't think you will either."

Draco couldn't help but feel a bit heartened by this.

“And finally,” said Healer Robinson, “there’s a matter of trust. She’s trusted you with her nightmares and her trauma. And last I heard you were building trust with her sexually too.”

Draco couldn’t help but smile a little at this. Healer Robinson caught it and raised his eyebrows. “You bound her then?”

Draco nodded.

“And did she panic?”

“No, I was really careful. She said it was the best she’s ever had.”

Healer Robinson spread his hands out. “There you go then.”

Draco was still uncertain. Healer Robinson must have seen the look on his face.

“Draco,” Healer Robinson cut him off. “She trusts you. You and I both know that binding requires some level of trust between the parties in the best of circumstances. But when you’re talking about somebody with a trauma history like Miss Granger’s... well she’s not my patient so I’m not going to armchair diagnose her. But I think it says a lot about her feelings for you if she trusted you to do that to her, and it didn’t cause a panic attack. My point is that she trusted you not to hurt her when she was in a very vulnerable state. And if you want to tell her these things, then you have to trust her the same way. You will never be sure if she reciprocates your feelings or wants the same things that you do until you talk to her. And I rather think you will have a hard time Savoring until you do.”

Draco sat back. As usual, he knew Healer Robinson was right.

“I’m still not sure how to do it,” he said slowly.

Healer Robinson shrugged. “You just say it. Maybe come up with a little speech if you need to. Practice doesn’t hurt. But it’s a bit like asking her out the first time. You have to put yourself out there. You have to accept that it might go wrong. And then if you still want it, you have to do it anyway.”

Draco nodded. “I need to find a good time to do it. Sometime when she’s not distracted by other things.”

“The good news is you aren’t on any timeline here. There’s absolutely no rush. Just think about what you want to say, and the moment will eventually present itself.”

Draco exhaled. “OK. You’re right. And to be clear, I’m not going to fuck with her potion. I may be fantasizing about having kids with her, but I wouldn’t actually do that to her.”

“I’m glad to hear it. If it ever crosses from idle fantasy to actual consideration, then you need to tell her to get on a commercial potion.”

Draco nodded. “I will.”

Hermione

“The Slug Club is meeting next Friday. John, I know you rescheduled the last dueling club meeting before break for that night, but this is far too important. I want all the staff there and Harry Potter too, if he would consent to it. The Minister of Magic will be there, and it’s an exceptional opportunity. I’m pulling out all the stops and inviting quite a few additional guests.”

Hermione sighed a bit as she listened to Horace pontificate about his upcoming party in the staff common room.

Dawlish made a face, but sighed in defeat. “Fine, we can just cancel it then. I’m sure the students will understand.”

Hermione caught the look on Draco’s face.

“You don’t have to look so happy,” she said under her breath as she moved away from the group.

“Of course I’m happy. With the break coming up it will be nearly three weeks before I have to watch Potter try to kill you again.”

“I would rather duel Harry than spend the evening with Horace. And I know Harry agrees with me about that,” she whispered.

“Let me have this one, love. It’s going to be the best weekend I’ve had all term.”

Hermione studied him a bit. “I didn’t know it bothered you that much. I know it’s dangerous, but we worked up to it. You know we rarely get seriously injured.”

Draco’s jaw tightened, and a muscle twitched. “It’s hard to watch sometimes,” he said quietly. “And that first night you *did* get seriously injured. And you refused to see Poppy so I had to pump you full of experimental potions. It was a lot, Hermione.”

Hermione blinked. She wasn’t prepared to stop dueling, but perhaps she could give more consideration to Draco’s feelings about it.

“Alright,” she said, touching his hand.

He furrowed his brow.

“I’ll talk to Harry about it. Maybe we can change the rules if it really makes you that worried.”

Draco’s face transformed.

“I... really? You would do that?”

She nodded. “Harry and I didn’t start with lethal spells, you know. We worked up to it over a period of many months. I’m sure he’d be willing to ramp down again. He gets plenty of practice with lethal spells in the aurors. He doesn’t need me for it.”

To her surprise he grabbed her and gave her a huge hug. “Thank you. Seriously, that would make me so happy.”

Hermione dipped her head toward him. “Still excited about the Slug Club then?”

He grinned. “A lot less so now. But I’ll never say no to seeing you all dressed up. It’s going to be a real do.”

Hermione frowned. “I’ll have to find something to wear I suppose.”

“Wear a little black dress. And Malfoy jewelry,” he said as he took her hand and led her toward her puzzle table.

Hermione came to a halt. “You’re sure?” she said carefully. “You know what your mum said about that...”

He rolled his eyes at her, but smiled a little. “I know the traditions, love. And it doesn’t bother me if it doesn’t bother you. I want you to wear things from my vault.”

Hermione felt herself blushing. She doubted anybody but she and Draco would even know, but she couldn’t deny she was pleased.

“Alright,” she said.

He nodded with satisfaction. “Good. Show me your dress this week, and I’ll send for something that works with it. Horace has been driving me mad telling me all the details. I could probably make you coordinate with the fucking cocktail napkins if you want me to.”

Hermione laughed, as she settled in at her puzzle.

“Is this finally going to be the one then?” he asked as he looked at the picture on the box. It was a particularly hard one, featuring a Jackson Pollock painting.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I bought this one from a charity shop, but if a piece is missing from this one too I’ll have to investigate. It’s happened too many times to be a coincidence.”

“Hmmm,” he said. “I still say it’s a house elf.”

“But that doesn’t make *sense*,” she argued. “Why would they only take one or two pieces?”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Revenge for spew.”

“It’s not *spew*, it’s S.P.E.W., and that was *years* ago.”

He just grinned. “They have long memories darling. Now then, I need to go check my Inner Eye, and then I’ll be off for patrols. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Hermione just rolled her eyes, but she smiled at him as he slipped back to her room – *their room*, she mentally corrected herself because Draco hadn’t slept in his own bed a single night all term – and turned to her puzzle.

A few minutes later he emerged with a look of consternation on his face.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Astoria’s in the student potions storeroom again,” he said. “She’s allowed to be in there, but it’s odd. She has plenty of opportunities to visit during class hours.”

“Well she’s officially out past curfew,” huffed Hermione. “You can take points or give her detention for it this time.”

He nodded. “I shouldn’t be too long, but there are a couple other students snogging or shagging I need to break up too, and they’re on opposite ends of the castle. Don’t feel like you have to wait up for me.”

Hermione nodded as he left, and she looked back at her puzzle. She scanned the common room and saw that she was almost alone. The only person who hadn’t already turned in was Horace, and he was buried behind a paper on the other side of the room.

Smiling to herself Hermione started tapping the pieces of her puzzle with her wand. She knew this may take awhile, but she surely had time before Draco returned. Besides, she had just opened the box, and no witch, wizard, or elf had had an opportunity to steal from her yet. She got to work and placed a tracking spell on every puzzle piece as she sorted them between border pieces and regular pieces. She was just finishing up when Draco came back in and raised his eyebrows in surprise to see her still awake.

“This one took ages to sort,” she said simply. “And quite a few pieces were stuck together. I had to take them apart too.”

“Why didn’t you just leave them that way?” he asked curiously as they walked back to their room together.

Hermione was scandalized, despite the fact that she had told a little white lie to her boyfriend. “I can’t do that! That would be cheating!” she said.

He just rolled his eyes at her, but smiled a little as he pulled her in and shut the door.

“So any good ones tonight?” she asked, as he pulled her to him and nuzzled her neck.

“Mmmm, Davies has really taken a leaf out of our book and is working his way through the Gryffindor seventh year girls in the Astronomy Tower. This is the third time I’ve caught him.”

She giggled. “Did you give him detention yet?”

“Nah,” he said. “It’s a good show of interhouse unity. I have a theory he’s going to single-handedly breach the Gryffindor-Slytherin barrier by the end of the year.”

“I rather think *we* breached that barrier,” she teased, “if we’re the ones setting an example.”

“True,” he said. “And I caught that same pair of Hufflepuffs in a secret passage near the Charms corridor this time. They *still* haven’t moved on from kissing with tongue. I told them that I would give them both detention if they weren’t feeling each other up the next time I caught them.”

“Draco!” she said, laughing. “You’re terrible!”

“You’re the one espousing sex education, darling. I’m just reinforcing the message.”

She swatted him on the shoulder, and he just grinned at her.

“And Astoria?” she asked.

Now he frowned a bit. “Gone. I went to catch her first, actually, but she had already left when I got there. I couldn’t very well take points for what I saw on the map.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this. “No, you’re right.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, but I’ll keep an eye on it,” he said.

Hermione nodded as she pulled him over to the bed. “Come on, I’m knackered. Sleep tonight, shag in the morning.”

“Right you are, love,” he said as he stripped down and slipped under the covers with her.

They settled into their usual starting positions with her head on his chest and turned off the lights. Hermione knew they would shift in the night. They always did. They usually woke up to Draco spooning her or their positions reversed – Hermione on her back and Draco’s head on *her* chest, hanging onto her for dear life. For some reason she was feeling particularly contemplative tonight as she realized they had built habits and routines together, even unconscious ones. It warmed her and made her feel at peace with the world.

It wasn’t long before his breathing evened out, and Hermione lifted her head slightly and watched him for a few minutes in the moonlight. His white blond hair gleamed, though the chiseled lines of his face were bathed in shadows. He looked so young like this, as though he hadn’t been through a war and tortured and nearly killed. But she realized those things, along with his healing, had made him who he was today, and she wouldn’t change him for the world. She loved him too much.

“I do,” she whispered. “I really love you.”

She felt his hand that was resting on her hip flicker in his sleep as she said this, and it was almost like he could hear her. But no, he was asleep. It was just a dream.

Hopes and dreams.

They hadn't talked about it again, but Hermione had started to think that she might have an inkling of what Draco wanted from her. He was too attentive, too passionate, too protective, too bound by duty for this to be leading anywhere else.

Is that what I want? Do I want to be Lady Malfoy and give him an heir?

She had thought about this night after night. And she wasn't sure why tonight was different from the others. Maybe it was the look of sheer relief on his face when she offered to ramp down her dueling. Maybe it was his insistence that she wear Malfoy jewelry to Horace's soiree. Maybe it was just him – his good humor, his teasing, the way he always managed to scandalize her and make her laugh at the same time.

Yes, I want it. God, I want it so much.

She just had to find a way to tell him.

“Damn!” she muttered.

It was twenty minutes before she *really* needed to get dressed for Horace's party, but Hermione had been so close to finishing her puzzle that she had put it off. Now she was staring down at the five holes and four pieces she had left, and she was sure of it. There was a puzzle piece thief at Hogwarts.

She quickly placed the four pieces she had and looked at the one that was missing. It was a white background like all the others, and it probably had some black and yellow splatter paint on it, based on the pieces surrounding it. She didn't have much time, but maybe she could cast the spell and at least eliminate the members of staff before she really had to get ready.

She muttered the incantation with her wand held flat in her hand as she focused on the piece she needed to find. To her slight surprise, her wand didn't point toward the door to the common room, but instead pointed down the hallway to the staff bedrooms.

She hesitated for a moment. She wasn't particularly keen on going into anybody's bedroom. But maybe if she knew who it was, she could ask the person. Perhaps it was somehow just a mistake and the piece had been caught up in something.

She cautiously followed the direction of her wand, waiting for it to point a hard right or left indicating the door she was supposed to enter. To her surprise she kept moving further and further down the hall until finally there were only two doors left: hers and Draco's.

As she passed Draco's door the wand turned a hard right and started to vibrate. Hermione's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

She had a lot fewer qualms about going into Draco's room unannounced than anybody else's, and she cracked open the door and slipped inside. She wasn't expecting him back yet, because he had gone out flying. Sure enough the room was empty. She held her wand flat, and slowly moved around the room until she narrowed it down to his nightstand drawer.

"Why you little..." she muttered, as she opened the drawer and stared down at a dozen missing puzzle pieces.

Her jaw dropped, and she pulled them out, organizing them and realizing he was responsible for nearly all of the holes in her puzzles for the entire year. She recalled that a couple of the puzzles from the charity shop had been missing two pieces, and he had only taken one of them. But all the rest would have been complete if he hadn't been such a giant arse.

Scowling now she gathered the pieces and then glanced back down in the nightstand and noticed something that looked like a piece of paper shoved in the back. She reached her hand in and realized it was a photograph. She pulled it out and saw her and Draco dancing on New Year's Eve. It was the original picture that had made it into *The Daily Prophet*.

She flipped it over and saw his handwriting.

Hermione & Draco, just after midnight on Dec. 31, 2001 – best night of my life up to this point

She bit her lip and couldn't help but smile a little at it. She glanced down and saw there was one more. She pulled it out too, this time it was the picture from their date the following day when he had kissed her in front of the press. She flipped it over too.

Hermione & Draco, January 1, 2002 – best first date ever (H says it was our second; I disagree)

She looked between the two pictures which absolutely melted her heart, and the puzzle pieces which had been driving her mad all year, and she was utterly torn. Finally deciding she had a right to be mad at him – even if she would forgive him eventually – she put the pictures back in the drawer with a fond look and then grabbed her puzzle pieces and steeled herself.

She marched out of his room and into hers and found him getting ready for the party.

"Leaving it a bit late are you?" he asked, looking at her clothes.

She just glowered at him. He gave her a wary look now as he realized she was upset about something.

"Explain yourself!" she finally said as she threw the puzzle pieces on the bed.

He stared at them for a full ten seconds, and then to her dismay he threw back his head and laughed.

"Why you little..." she started, but he just moved over to her and tried to kiss her.

"I am not kissing you, you giant git! What the hell was this?"

“Just teasing you, darling,” he said with a playful smile.

“It’s been driving me bloody mad all year!” she insisted.

“Nah, if you had been really upset I would have stopped. You like having a mystery to solve. It took you longer than I thought it would.”

Her jaw dropped. Not only had he been stealing her puzzle pieces, but now he was *insulting* her about them? She scowled again and harumphed as she turned her back on him.

“Oh don’t be like that princess,” he said as he came up to her. “I was just teasing you. You know I can’t resist. It’s my version of foreplay.”

She whipped around again. “Foreplay? You’re telling me this was all foreplay? The Union Jack is there! You’ve been stealing from me since the very first week!”

He shrugged. “And I’ve been wanking to thoughts of you since the very first week. I stole it and then had a fantastic wank right afterwards.”

She blinked. She was torn again. He seemed to sense her indecision.

“Tell you what,” he said reasonably. “You can be mad at me while you get ready for the party. We’re going to be late if you don’t hurry. I’ll try to make it up to you later.”

She huffed, but marched into the bathroom and quickly yanked on her black dress and then accidently stabbed herself in the eye with her eyeliner.

“Fucking ow!” she hissed.

Stupid Draco with his *stupid* foreplay stealing her *stupid* puzzle pieces and making her poke herself in her *stupid* eye. It was watering aggressively, and she had to start all over.

She finally emerged feeling very harassed indeed, as Draco stepped forward. “You look lovely,” he said.

She rolled her eyes at him. He wasn’t going to get off that easy.

His lips quirked into a smile as though he could read her thoughts, and he said, “Here, beautiful, let me give you a peace offering.”

She narrowed her eyes, but watched as he pulled out a couple boxes and handed them to her. She glanced up at him, but opened them and nearly stumbled backwards as she saw the earrings inside.

“It’s a bit reminiscent of New Year’s Eve,” he acknowledged. “But this is Malfoy and not Black. Besides, your dress doesn’t necessarily need a necklace.”

He was right of course. Her little black dress was tailored perfectly, but it had a bateau neckline that wouldn’t look bare at all without a necklace. And the earrings were nothing

short of spectacular. She wouldn't need anything on her neck competing for attention. They were chandeliers in design, made entirely out of diamonds.

"Draco, this is too much..." she started, but he shook his head.

"No, Horace wants it to be really nice. You won't be the only one."

"Everybody's going to know these aren't mine..." she said, trailing off when she saw the look on his face.

"Hermione, that's rather the point. A lot of important people will be there. Hell, the press is even going to be there. You're mine, and I'm really serious about you. I want everybody to know it."

Hermione felt herself blush a little, but she finally nodded, and his eyes warmed. She carefully removed the earrings and placed them in her ears.

"You look like a Malfoy," he said.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she forced her face to stay passive. "I rather doubt that. I'm not blonde."

He just laughed and pulled her to him. "Am I forgiven?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You can't buy your way to forgiveness, Draco."

"But I didn't buy these," he said very seriously. "They've been in my vault for two hundred years. I'm letting you wear them as a public expression of my very strong feelings for you. They're meant to trounce the hopes of any witches who still haven't gotten the memo about me, cock block any wizards who think they have a chance with you, and send the society matrons back to my mother to gossip about how thoroughly smitten I am. Doesn't that get me any points?"

Hermione couldn't help herself. She was giving him a reluctant smile by the end of his little speech. He gave her a boyish grin and wiggled his eyebrows at her, and finally she laughed.

"Alright, fine. You're forgiven, I suppose. But don't steal my puzzle pieces again, you prat."

"Never shall I ever, cross my heart," he said with mock solemnity, as he pulled her to him for a kiss. When they broke apart he looked down at her and touched her earrings looking uncharacteristically serious now. "I can't tell you how much I love seeing these on you. It does something to me."

Hermione felt herself blush, but she was secretly very pleased. "Well like you said, I'm yours. And I suppose that means I should dress the part."

He nodded and smiled a little as he raised her hand for a kiss and then tugged on it. "Come on beautiful. We're officially late."

She let herself be led out the door and through the common room toward the dungeons. It was time to show the world she was his.

Chapter 20: Amortentia

Draco

Draco slipped his arm around Hermione's waist and smiled for the camera. Her earrings were like a beacon in the dim light as she threw her head back and smiled too. Draco felt an enormous rush of satisfaction as he looked down at her, and he strongly suspected the press would be reporting that Hermione and Draco were still together and more serious than ever the next day.

Horace's annual holiday party had moved to the spring after the Ministry instituted its winter gala. Horace declared that there were too many things that happened in December, and he decided that attendance would be better if *his* party was at a time of year when there wasn't as much to do. So for the past few years, Draco had been attending this event as an unofficial kick-off to spring, right before the Easter holidays, and he was well-versed in the kinds of people who usually showed up.

This year, Horace had managed a social coup by attracting the presence of the Minister of Magic, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter, none of whom had come for the past several years. It was not unlike Narcissa's New Year's Eve Ball, and Horace had his highest acceptance rate ever once it was known that those three would be in attendance.

Draco's presence had always attracted a bit of a crowd too, but this year the press was especially interested. Since he and Hermione had been holed up at Hogwarts, they hadn't stepped out with each other publicly since their first real date. Other than a photograph of them getting drinks in the Three Broomsticks during a Hogsmeade weekend they chaperoned together, the press had received nothing for months. The gossip columnists were desperate for a glimpse of them, and Draco was rather determined to make it clear that things were good – spectacular, even. With their dearth of public dating, the articles had recently turned speculative that maybe they had broken up, and it made Draco incredibly annoyed every time some rumor like that was published.

He had been thoughtful when he picked something for Hermione to wear tonight. The earrings were some of Narcissa's favorites, and she had been photographed in them any number of times over the years. Draco knew it wouldn't take much digging for the gossip columnists to confirm what was already apparent: Hermione was wearing something very old, very valuable, and very obviously goblin made that would almost have to have come from a pureblood vault like the Malfoy's. With Draco's arm around her waist and his lips on her cheek, it would be obvious who had given them to her, and a quick check through their archives of old photographs would confirm that Hermione was wearing Malfoy legacy pieces and not something brand new.

Draco knew that brand new was good too, but nothing sent a message through the pureblood world quite like ancestral jewelry.

Draco glanced around and saw Rita Skeeter practically chomping at the bit when she saw them together. He gave her a dashing smile and then leaned down to kiss Hermione, who looked back at him in amusement.

As they walked toward the Minister of Magic, they passed Astoria, who glowered at them both. Draco rolled his eyes.

Of course Astoria's in the fucking Slug Club.

He had to admit she was a rather brilliant potion's student when she bothered to actually do the work. But it was the only nice thing he could say about her. She was here tonight with Terrance Hill again, who evidently was willing to risk social ostracization for an easy shag. But despite the fact that she had a date, Draco couldn't help but notice that her eyes were fixed on Draco and Hermione. He saw Astoria's jaw drop when Hermione's hair shifted to show her earrings. Draco just smirked as they moved on.

Message fucking received then. Good.

"Hermione!" said the Minister as they approached.

"Minister Shacklebolt," she said, smiling warmly as he shook her hand and then leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. The cameras flashed brilliantly.

The Minister just rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Hermione, call me Kingsley. Anybody who saved my arse from the Death Eaters while flying on a thestral with me gets the privilege of my first name."

Draco's eyebrows flew up at this. He had never heard this story.

Hermione, however, just rolled her eyes. "I was the one polyjuiced as Harry, and *you* saved *my* arse."

"Nonsense," said Minister Shacklebolt easily. "I'm pretty sure that when we took the official body count, yours was higher than mine."

Hermione gave him an amused look. "I'm not sure how on earth you could tell."

Minister Shacklebolt gave her a wolfish grin. "You've always had rather creative methods. Which reminds me... can I convince you to join the aurors?"

Draco's stomach flipped at this, but to his relief Hermione just rolled her eyes again. "*No*, Kingsley. I've said no every time you've asked me for the last three years."

"Well I have to keep trying, haven't I? I wouldn't be doing my duty to the public if I didn't. But I suppose it's for the best. Minerva would probably skin me alive if I took you from her."

Hermione gave him a gratified smile as the Minister turned to Draco. "And Draco Malfoy. How's my favorite donor?"

Draco smirked. It was true, he had donated quite a bit of money to Shacklebolt over the years. Draco felt he rather owed him one for giving him a way to stay out of Azkaban and heal his mind all at the same time. He caught Hermione's surprised look out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm still complaining about your administration on a weekly basis to Healer Robinson, sir," he said.

Minister Shacklebolt just chuckled at this and clapped Draco on the back. "Complain away. You know I can't do anything about my own administration half the time. But we have to have a figurehead don't we? Somebody to take the arrows slung by the public?"

Draco just raised an eyebrow. "I rather think that if you came out against my father publicly or any of the other Death Eaters for that matter, then their appeals would fall flat."

Shacklebolt gave him a sharp look. "I can't appear to be meddling. And from what I hear your father's appeal has taken a rather sharp turn ever since you fired his solicitor."

Draco could feel Hermione's eyes burning into him now, but he just took a calm sip of his drink and smirked at Shacklebolt.

"Lucius was rather rude about my relationship with Hermione when the news first broke. He seems to be coming around, so I'm sure I'll be rehiring his solicitor once I can spare the time to actually do it. But in the meantime, his case can give the younger solicitors in the public defender's office all sorts of practical experience they normally wouldn't get. I am a teacher, you know."

He felt Hermione choke on her drink next to him, and he calmly thumped her back. Minister Shacklebolt, however, had a look of sheer glee on his face, and he gave Draco a small toast.

"You'd do well in politics Draco, if you ever cared to dip your toes in the water."

Draco shrugged. "That was always Lucius's plan for me, so he made sure I learned from the best. But I'm afraid I've decided to do things my own way, and much like Horace I really prefer to work from the sidelines when it comes to that sort of thing."

Minister Shacklebolt nodded knowingly. "Well I'm pleased that you've been working with me over the past few years. Now speaking of Horace, I suppose I need to get the inevitable over with and go say hello."

Draco and Hermione chuckled at the long-suffering look that crossed the Minister's face as he said this, but then he seemed to pull himself together as he bid them farewell.

Hermione spun to him. "You never told me that about your father."

He shrugged. "It was a family thing, that's all."

"But Draco..." she started, and he just gave her a firm look.

“Hermione, I don’t give a shit what Father thinks about us. When the news broke he suggested I date some nice pureblood girl and keep you on the side as a piece of arse for my own pleasure while I’m at Hogwarts. I just thought he could use a little reminder that he turned control of the Malfoy fortune over to me when he went to prison, and that control is permanent. He’s not getting it back when he’s released. I don’t usually dangle the fortune over his head, but the fact of the matter is he can’t pay for *anything* unless I say he can. And if he suggests vile things like that, I’ll cut him off.”

Hermione’s eyes were huge now. “I had no idea you already controlled the fortune...” she whispered, looking a bit dazed at this. “I’m not sure about blackmailing him, Draco...”

He gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s not blackmail, not really. It’s just a reminder that he can’t be a total bastard to me or to you without consequences. Like I said, he seems to be coming around to it, and not just because he knows I won’t hire a solicitor for him until he does. He’s twisted, but he loves me in his own way, and he wants me to be happy even if he disapproves of the things that make me happy at first. He eventually came around to Hogwarts, and he’s coming around to you too. When I fired his solicitor it convinced him that I’m actually serious about you. That goes a long way with Lucius.”

She bit her lip. “Don’t you think it will hurt his appeal though? Surely you don’t want that...?”

Draco shrugged. “His solicitor had very little hope for it anyway, and things are moving slowly. I’ll rehire him before it becomes dire, but I don’t expect it will change the outcome at all. Lucius has always been overly optimistic about his chances. The best solicitor in the world can’t change the fact that he turned the Manor into headquarters for fucking Voldemort.”

Her face softened, and she pulled him in for a deep kiss. The cameras flashed again, but Draco didn’t care. He loved this witch, and it seemed like something he had just said had touched her deeply. He wouldn’t second guess it.

She broke away and gave him a shy smile before turning around to survey the crowd again.

“Oh look!” she said, “Neville’s here with Susan Bones! I haven’t seen her in an age. I should go say hi.”

Draco nodded. “Off you go then, love. I’ll get another drink and join you if I’m not waylaid first.”

She smiled gratefully as she moved over to Longbottom and Susan Bones, who were standing near a table with some of the chocolate mousse Hermione loved so much. Draco chuckled as he watched her set down her drink and pick up a mousse instead before turning to chat with them animatedly.

Draco turned and made his way to the bar, where a little house elf was handing out drinks.

Draco opened his mouth to order, but the elf cut him off.

“Tinsley saw Master Malfoy coming and has already made him a drink, sir! ‘Tis his favorite.”

Draco looked curiously at the proffered drink and saw it was an old fashioned.

“Made with Ogden’s, sir,” said the elf.

“Err, how did you know...?” started Draco.

“Oh Tinsley knows Sully sir,” he said simply. “She told me it is Master Malfoy’s favorite.”

Draco smiled knowingly at this. Draco had learned over the past year that Sully had a devious side to her. She always made sure things went exactly Draco’s way if she could help it, even when she wasn’t there.

“Well thank you and please tell Sully thank you for me too,” he said, as he took the drink and turned to find himself face-to-face with Potter.

“Ferret,” he smirked, nodding.

“Pothead,” said Draco, rolling his eyes. He turned back to Tinsley. “I’m guessing Potter here will be taking his Ogdens on the rocks.”

He saw Potter smirk a little. “Neat, actually.”

Draco rolled his eyes again, but the elf gave a toothy smile and quickly poured some Ogdens for him. Potter took an appreciative sip as he turned back to Draco.

“Hermione’s looking awfully sparkly tonight,” he said, giving Draco a knowing look.

Draco raised an eyebrow at this. He and Potter had developed a bit of a rapport over the past few months since they saw each other at dueling club every week and now shared both Hermione and Healer Robinson. Still, they had a tendency to needle each other just a bit.

Draco turned back to survey Hermione with some satisfaction, smiling to see she was already halfway through her mousse.

“Yes, well I know the rules about that sort of thing. I fully intend to make a statement without talking to the press at all. You know they’ve been wondering whether we broke up. I’m just setting the record straight.”

Draco knew that Potter and Ginny had learned about the rules the hard way. The press had been relentlessly speculative about whether or not they were engaged ever since the gossip columnists traced Ginny’s necklace from New Year’s Eve to old articles featuring Potter’s grandmother and Lily. While Potter and Ginny still hadn’t confirmed their engagement and were resolutely mute about the wedding Draco knew would be taking place the first weekend in July, they were still being hounded about it.

“I wish somebody had told me about those rules,” muttered Potter. “You may want to prepare yourself for a shitstorm of ‘has he asked her yet?’”

Draco shook his head. “Unlikely. It will just confirm that I’m really serious. Ginny wore one of the most famous legacy pieces from your vault that night. That’s why they all lost their goddamned minds about it. The Malfoys have a couple pieces like that too, but I haven’t put Hermione in them yet.”

“Fuck, I wish I had known that,” said Potter. “I would have just bought her something new that they couldn’t trace and told her to hold off on wearing that bloody necklace until the wedding.”

Draco shot him a questioning look. “She would have let you buy her something that expensive?”

Potter shrugged. “She always objects at first, but I do it anyway. Sometimes I do it behind her back and then tell her once it’s done. Hermione’s worked on her for me over the years, but she can be exactly the same way as Ginny when it’s something for her. I’ve learned they both cave pretty quickly when I insist, and they secretly like it. They just rarely admit it.”

Draco had to nod in acknowledgment of this, remembering that Potter had actually bought Hermione a house behind her back. And she had objected to the jewelry tonight, but went along with it fairly quickly once he insisted. He tucked away that little tidbit about her and raised his glass to take a sip. As it got to his nose he automatically inhaled and then paused. He furrowed his brow.

Potter must have been watching him, because he said, “What?” in confusion.

Draco inhaled again. “It’s just... it smells wrong. It smells like...”

Draco had picked up an oddly floral note in the drink, and it had reminded him of Hermione. He automatically lifted his eyes to find her, and he saw she was sipping her drink now too. But suddenly her face changed and she seemed to choke, as she gasped and put her drink back down on the table before doubling over.

“Hermione...” finished Draco. “Oh fuck, HERMIONE!”

He shouted this last bit, and Potter’s head whipped around to find her too, and they both shoved their way through the crowd to get to her as quickly as possible. Draco saw that Longbottom and Susan Bones had crouched down, and Longbottom was starting to panic, as Hermione’s breathing was getting labored.

“OUT OF THE FUCKING WAY!” Draco shouted, as he pushed forward toward them, with Potter on his heels. He heard Potter muttering a few spells to clear the crowd, and soon they were next to her, and Draco dropped to his knees just as her eyes rolled back, and she started to shake.

“No, no, no...” he started to mutter, trying to force the panic down and *think*.

Her drink. She had taken a drink of something.

Draco reached up to the nearby table and seized her drink and stuck his nose in it. He thought Longbottom was looking at him like he had lost his mind, but Draco ignored him as he forced himself to concentrate.

Red wine that seems to be medium bodied with notes of cherry, blackberry, and cassis – probably a grenache of some sort, but there’s something else. There’s an odd fermentation odor like overcooked ashwinder eggs and tentacula venom.

“She’s been poisoned,” he said, as he wrenched it away from his nose.

“Do you have a bezoar?” Potter asked frantically.

Draco just shook his head, as he thought quickly. “No, that won’t work for this, but I have something that should. Hang on,” and he rose and flung himself through a side door, which was mercifully close, and he quickly oriented himself in the dungeons. He sprinted to the spare dungeon where he and Horace worked on their experimental brews, and he made a beeline for the antidote they had been developing.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, *come on...*” he muttered as he sifted through the vials to find their most recent iteration. He finally located it and snatched it out of the box with the others, before turning around and sprinting back to the party.

By the time he arrived a crowd had started to gather, but Potter had been waiting for him and put on his best auror voice. “LET HIM THROUGH!” he bellowed.

The crowd parted for Draco, and he flung himself down next to Hermione. She was shaking violently now and starting to turn blue. Draco knew she must be having a very hard time breathing. He wrenched her mouth open as he unstoppered the bottle with his teeth and poured the potion down her throat. He massaged her throat a bit to make her swallow, and to his enormous relief she took a great, shuddering gasp of air and then stilled. Draco pulled her up close to him and just held her for a minute and closed his eyes to center himself. He realized he was shaking.

Horace arrived at Draco’s shoulder, looking bewildered and worried.

“Draco my boy! And Harry! What on earth happened?”

Draco opened his eyes and looked up at him. He released Hermione for a moment before picking up the drink and shoving it into Horace’s hand. “Smell it,” he said tersely.

Horace looked at him in confusion, but put his nose into the glass and inhaled. Draco pulled Hermione back to him as he watched Horace’s expression change from confusion to horror.

“Merlin and Morgana,” he breathed. “But how did you...? A bezoar wouldn’t...” he spluttered.

“Our antidote,” was all Draco said.

“But it’s experimental!” he said in amazement.

“Yes, and I’d say some our experiments worked. She’s breathing again. I’m going to take her to Poppy.”

Horace just nodded mutely as Draco stood and lifted Hermione in his arms. He exchanged a look with Potter.

“Grab her drink. Mine too,” he muttered.

Potter nodded and grabbed both drinks, as he silently followed Draco out of the dungeons.

They were halfway to the hospital wing when Potter spoke. “Tell me what you know.”

Draco glanced back at Potter, and he saw a look on Potter’s face that told him Potter was out for blood.

Good.

Draco’s own mind was going about a thousand miles an hour trying to think through what the hell had just happened. He had started to spiral as soon as he knew Hermione wasn’t dead, but Potter’s question pulled him out of it and made him focus.

“Somebody spiked her wine with poison. I definitely smelled ashwinder eggs and tentacula venom. Tentacula venom is highly toxic if overcooked, and it produces a rather distinct odor. It doesn’t respond to bezoars, but Horace and I have been working to develop a universal antidote. It’s not done yet, but I thought it would counteract the poison that I’m pretty sure is in that drink.”

Potter was nodding. “And your drink?”

“It’s spiked with amortentia,” said Draco curtly. “I caught a whiff of Hermione’s perfume right before I drank it.”

Potter turned and gave him a startled look. Then he frowned and sniffed it too. “I mostly smell firewhiskey,” he said.

Draco rolled his eyes. “That’s probably because you like firewhiskey so much. You can’t separate the smell of the actual firewhiskey in the drink from the scent of the amortentia.”

“But my amortentia smells like treacle tart, brooms, and Ginny. Not firewhiskey,” said Potter. “Slughorn brewed it for our class on the first day of potions in sixth year, remember?”

Potter’s very accurate memory about this startled Draco a little bit. But as Draco thought back to that particular lesson he recalled that Potter won *felix felicitis* that day. It probably shouldn’t be a surprise that he remembered it so well.

“Amortentia changes,” he said simply. “The scents evolve as you get older and the things that attract you change. That being said, if you smelled Ginny back then, you might still smell her now. Try again and focus on her scent.”

They were still walking, but Potter closed his eyes and stuck his nose in the drink and breathed. Suddenly his eyes widened.

“I got it...” he said in amazement. “It’s very faint, but it’s there.”

Draco just nodded, and they walked in silence for a few more moments.

“How on earth is your nose that good?” Potter asked in slight disbelief.

Draco shot him a look. “Scent training is part of the curriculum for a potions mastery. That’s why Horace could smell the poison too. And I’ve always been rather good at it because Father used to make me scent train with wine and liquor as a kid so I could impress business associates one day.”

Potter gave him a sympathetic look at this, but then turned thoughtful. “Who would try to poison her and make you fall in love with them?”

“I can think of somebody,” muttered Draco as they approached the hospital wing.

“Who?” demanded Potter.

“Hang on, let’s get Hermione settled first,” he said.

Potter nodded as he held the door open for Draco.

“Poppy!” he called. Poppy poked her head out of her office and blanched when she saw Hermione.

“Bring her here,” she said quickly, and Draco lowered her on the bed.

“What happened?” she asked as she started casting spells. “Surely she wasn’t dueling dressed like this?”

Draco felt a slight sense of satisfaction as Poppy cast Potter an accusing look, but Potter just raised his hands in the air.

“Not dueling. Poison,” said Draco. “Most likely from a failed amortentia brew from the seventh year potions class on Valentine’s Day.”

Potter spun around to look at him. “You didn’t tell me that!”

“I told you I smelled overcooked ashwinder eggs and tentacula venom. What else could it possibly be?” he asked, rolling his eyes.

“I’m not a potions master, Malfoy,” said Potter a bit hotly.

“Clearly,” muttered Draco, but he caught a look at Potter’s face and sighed. “Look, I won’t know for sure until I break it down, but Horace decided to give the seventh years a Valentine’s treat and let them try their hands at amortentia. It’s very tricky and turns

poisonous when it goes wrong. Most of the class royally fucked it up and brewed poison instead of love potion.”

Potter was rubbing his temples now.

“What else is she on?” Poppy asked tersely, as she studied Hermione’s vitals and began casting spells.

“My dream potion that’s in a clinical trial and obviously I gave her an antidote. Oh and she’s on a special contraceptive I brew for her. Nothing else,” he said.

Potter shot him a look at this, but Draco just stared back at him defiantly until Potter looked away.

Poppy nodded. “I’d like to give her a healing draught to help her lungs clear. She inhaled some fluid, but I don’t know if the ingredients will react with anything else you’ve brewed for her.”

“Let me see,” said Draco, and Poppy handed him the bottle. He turned it over to read the list of ingredients, thinking through it quickly.

“That should be fine,” he said.

Poppy nodded and poured her a dose.

“How is she?” asked Potter quietly. Draco turned all of his attention to Poppy now, anxiety starting to fester again.

Poppy sighed. “She’ll be OK. Whatever was in that antidote worked, thank Merlin. But it’s going to be a day or two before she’s back on her feet.”

Draco and Potter both exhaled in relief at exactly the same time and sank down in chairs next to each other. Poppy gave them both small smiles as she bustled around, getting Hermione settled in.

“So your theory about who did this...” started Potter.

Draco just nodded, forcing his brain to think logically. It seemed so extreme, but then again...

“I’m almost certain it was Astoria Greengrass,” he said.

Potter gave him a confused look.

“Who?”

“Astoria Greengrass,” said Draco. “She’s a seventh year student. Her older sister was in our class. Daphne Greengrass, do you remember? Slytherin House, both of them.”

Potter narrowed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah, I remember Daphne. I don’t remember Astoria though. Why do you think it was her?”

Draco sighed. “A few reasons. When I first came to Hogwarts, Mother was all beside herself because she thought it meant I would never get married and produce an heir for the title.”

Potter gave him a strange look.

“I know,” said Draco, “but that’s my mother for you. Anyway, she got over it once she realized I would be surrounded by sixth and seventh year girls. Evidently she made a list of some eligible witches for me to consider, and somehow Astoria learned that she was on this list. She threw herself at me for most of the first term. I avoided her as much as I could, but then she arranged to have a detention with me one night right before term was over. Hermione volunteered to supervise it for me so I wouldn’t have to be alone with her, and they ended up arguing. Astoria tried to cast the cruciatus on Hermione.”

“Excuse me?” asked Potter incredulously.

Draco just nodded.

“Why the hell did nobody tell me?” he asked with indignation.

Draco shrugged. “Because you’re an auror and probably would have pressed charges. Hermione’s practically an auror herself, so she handled it. But she didn’t want Astoria to get expelled or go to Azkaban for it. So she kept it quiet.”

“Merlin,” muttered Potter.

Draco nodded. “I did tell Minerva about it, and there’s a record of it on her student file. And then I told Mother about it too. She invited Astoria to the party on New Year’s Eve just on the off-chance she would do something ridiculous and ruin herself socially. Apparently Astoria made a scene after she saw me pick Hermione to dance, and she’s been socially ostracized in pureblood circles ever since.”

“*That* was Astoria Greengrass?” asked Potter in amazement. “That teenager who was shouting about how you broke her heart? She was absolutely raving.”

Draco shot him a look. “I was with Hermione at the time, so I only heard about it from Mother later. But yes.”

Potter nodded. “Alright, so she’s clearly obsessed with you and angry with Hermione. I saw that for myself. That gives her a motive, and it’s enough for me to open an investigation, but I can’t press charges with it. Do you have any other proof?”

Draco took a deep breath and thought about it. “She’s in seventh year potions. She’s actually a very good potions student and is one of the few I thought would pull off the amortentia, but her potion went particularly bad that day. It turned highly toxic. I’ve also seen her on the

Marauder's Map in the student potions storeroom at odd hours of the day. She could get most of the ingredients to make amortentia from there, except the ashwinder eggs."

Potter shot him a look when Draco mentioned the map, but he didn't say anything about it. Instead he looked thoughtful as he considered this. "Was she at the party tonight?"

Draco nodded slowly. "Yes. I saw her as we walked in. She saw Hermione's earrings and looked insanely jealous. And I noticed Hermione put her drink down to eat some mousse just before she was poisoned. Astoria could have walked by and spiked it."

"How did she get yours though? You were at the bar," said Potter.

Draco thought hard, and then it came to him. "The elf," he said slowly. "That elf had my drink ready to go when he saw me approach. I didn't even order it."

Potter furrowed his brow. "But Hogwarts house elves can't tamper with the food. It would be against their magic."

Draco narrowed his eyes. Potter was right of course. But then he remembered. It had been niggling at him ever since Hermione collapsed.

"But that elf didn't call me Professor Malfoy," said Draco slowly. "He called me *Master* Malfoy."

Potter's eyes widened.

"Sully!" cried Draco.

Sully appeared with a *CRACK!* and a bow.

"Yes Master?" she asked.

"Sully, do you know an elf named Tinsley?"

"Yes Master, I do. Tinsley is asking Sully for Master's favorite drink."

Draco nodded. "And where does Tinsley work, Sully? Is he at Hogwarts?"

"Oh no, Master," said Sully. "Tinsley is a Greengrass elf, sir."

Draco could practically feel the energy radiating off of Potter now.

"Thank you, Sully. Could you please bring me my portable potions kit from the Manor? I need to do some work here tonight."

"Right away, sir," said Sully, who disappeared with another *CRACK!*

"That's probably enough to charge her," said Potter. "If her elf gave you a spiked drink, it implicates her in Hermione's poisoning circumstantially."

Draco nodded, as Sully returned with the requested items. "Thanks Sully. That will be all."

Sully disappeared again, and Draco started to set everything up on the table.

“What are you doing?” asked Potter curiously.

“I’m going to break this down,” said Draco, gesturing toward Hermione’s wine. “We’ll find out if that poison matches Horace’s notes about Astoria’s failed amortentia.”

Potter’s eyes widened. “Notes?”

Draco nodded. “Sure. You know that’s how Horace grades potions practicals. He gives the student a short summary that justifies their grade. Horace keeps a copy of everything for his files.”

Potter lit up like a Christmas tree. “Brilliant, Malfoy,” he said.

Draco just nodded, as he got to work.

She’s going to fucking pay.

Chapter 21: Six Days

Hermione

Hermione stirred and tried not to groan as she opened her eyes. She blinked groggily as she looked down to see she was wearing a hospital gown, and Draco was asleep in a chair next to her bed.

What on earth...?

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and tried to remember what the hell had happened. She remembered being at the party and chatting with Neville and Susan Bones, whom she was delighted to learn had gotten together after Neville chaperoned the previous Hogsmeade weekend. Evidently Susan worked in the village plant nursery, and they had started chatting when Neville dropped by for some supplies. They had been having a nice time together when Hermione drank something that made her feel like her insides were on fire and...

She couldn't remember from there. But obviously something had happened to her.

She looked at Draco again and saw he had dark circles under his eyes, and he was still dressed in his clothes from the party. She couldn't bring herself to wake him to ask. Besides, Hermione herself was very tired. She sank back down in the bed and closed her eyes. She was just about to drift off when she heard the door to the hospital wing slam open.

"Fuck Potter," she heard Draco mutter, as he rustled in his chair.

Hermione was awake now too, but she didn't open her eyes. She knew that the moment she did, Draco would fuss over her, and she wanted answers.

"She's gone," said Harry's voice tersely. "Apparently she left the party just after we did, and she hasn't been seen since. I summoned the map from Hermione's room like you suggested, and she's not on it. She's left the grounds. I have a team going to her parents' house now to investigate, but I doubt she will be there. It's too obvious."

"Goddammit," muttered Draco.

"We'll find her, Malfoy. She's just a kid, and I'm sure she's panicking since her plan didn't work. She'll make a mistake, and we'll get her. The case against her is a lot tighter now that she's run."

"She tried to kill Hermione. She tried to kill her, and I..."

Draco made a slightly choked sound, and Hermione held her breath.

Who had tried to kill her?

“She wasn’t successful,” said Harry in a soothing voice that surprised Hermione. “You were brilliant, Malfoy. You saved her. And Astoria was an idiot to try and slip you *amortentia*. You’re a potions master, for fuck’s sake. If she’s stupid enough to try something like that, then she’s also stupid enough to get herself caught. Kingsley and Minerva are both beside themselves about it, and they’ve given me every resource the Ministry and Hogwarts can offer to find her. Trust me, she doesn’t stand a chance.”

Astoria? Astoria Greengrass tried to kill me and give Draco amortentia?

Hermione could hardly believe it, but then again... she had to admit that she felt Astoria’s eyes on her most of the night. Astoria had dropped Transfiguration this term after the incident in detention, but every time Hermione caught sight of her, Astoria practically shook with rage.

Had she really gone that far with it?

“I just... fuck, she almost died. And I’ve never told her half the things I want to tell her, and I just...” She heard another choke, and she sensed Harry sitting down now. Hermione held her breath as there was a long silence.

“For what it’s worth, I can relate,” Harry finally said in a quiet voice. “I never told Ginny either until after Voldemort was gone. Both of us almost died during the final battle. I mean, I actually *did* die in a way. I certainly meant to at any rate. But I passed by her under my invisibility cloak right before I went to Voldemort that night, and I didn’t stop to tell her I loved her.”

Hermione’s heart started to pound. She had never heard this before. She could hardly believe Harry was saying this to Draco, of all people. But she knew as well as anybody that stressful, awful situations brought people together in odd ways.

“How did you tell her then? How did you finally do it?”

Harry chuckled a little. “I didn’t. She told me first.”

“Fuck Potter, that’s not helpful,” groaned Draco, and Hermione struggled not to smile. She knew she shouldn’t be eavesdropping, but it warmed her heart so much to hear her best friend and boyfriend talk to each other like this.

“Maybe she’ll tell you first,” said Harry reasonably, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

“You’re assuming she even does,” snapped Draco. “I mean, I’m so far gone it’s not even funny.”

“I don’t know, I think it’s a little funny,” said Harry.

“Oh fuck you,” said Draco, but without any real heat. Harry just laughed, and again Hermione tried not to smile.

“It is, though,” said Harry. “Hermione Granger, bookworm extraordinaire and the muggleborn Golden Girl brought Draco sodding Malfoy to his fucking knees. I was horrified

when I first found out about you two, but then I actually thought about it and decided it was one of the greatest things that she's ever done. And that's saying something."

Hermione could practically feel Draco rolling his eyes at this. But then his tone turned smug. "Actually, she's on *her* knees quite a bit," he said.

Hermione forced herself not to react. *Why you little...*

To Hermione's chagrin Harry choked at this. "Dammit Malfoy, I do *not* want to think about her doing that. She's my sister."

She heard Draco chuckle before he finally sighed. "Fine, you're right though. She's got me by the balls so hard I don't even know what to do about it. I would give her anything she wants. Literally anything at all."

All I want is you, she thought, absolutely struck by all the things he was saying.

There was a long silence until Harry said, "What do *you* want then?"

"Just her," said Draco instantly. "Just her alive and healthy."

Hermione felt herself start to tear up a little, and she struggled to keep her face still.

"Then tell her that," said Harry. "I think she'll surprise you. She's been my best friend for nearly half my life now, and I have never seen her this happy."

Hermione felt a swell of affection for Harry. And he was right. She never *had* been this happy, attempted murder plots aside.

She heard some rustling as one of them stood up. "I'm going to head back and start working on this," said Harry.

"Potter," said Draco. Hermione heard Harry pause. "Can you get me an authorization to make a portkey? Hermione was going to come to the Manor for Easter, but I want to take her somewhere else first. I don't want the press or Astoria to find out where we're going, and we need a break from all this."

Hermione felt more awake at this news. She certainly wasn't expecting it.

"Yeah, I can do that," said Harry easily. "I'll get Kingsley to sign it tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Draco, and Hermione heard the door open and close.

Now she heard some more rustling, and then a dip on her bed. Draco sat down and was stroking her face. Deciding that now was as good a time as any to wake up, Hermione gave a convincing eyelid flutter, and Draco suddenly grabbed her cheek.

"Hermione? Hermione, darling, are you awake? Poppy! Poppy, she's waking up!"

Hermione heard the telltale bustling of Poppy Pomfrey coming into the room.

“Right, Hermione, how are you feeling?” she asked briskly as she started to cast diagnostic spells.

“I’m alright. Really tired...” she said.

Poppy nodded to herself and said, “Your vitals seem fine, but your magical reserves dipped a bit. You should rest for a day or so, and then you’ll be good as new. You were poisoned, you know. I’ll let Draco fill you in on the details, but I must say his antidote was quite the thing.”

Hermione swallowed and nodded, and then decided to ask her questions in front of Draco. She suspected he knew this about her anyway, and if he didn’t he had a right to know. Based on what she overheard with Harry he was in deep. She needed to be honest with him.

“Poppy, the only thing I remember is that it felt like my insides were burning while it was happening. Somewhere down low. And then I passed out. Did it affect my condition in any way?”

She felt Draco grip her hand hard at this, and now she was sure that he knew.

Poppy pursed her lips and did a few other spells, but then shook her head. “No dear, the damage was limited to your stomach and intestines, but I healed it right after Draco and Mr. Potter brought you in. There was no damage to your reproductive system.”

She felt Draco give a great sigh of relief, and he squeezed her hand again. She just nodded and instinctively turned into him.

“Now dear, I’ll let you rest,” said Poppy. “I want you to stay here for at least another day before I release you for break.”

Hermione just nodded, knowing that there was no point in arguing with Poppy about this sort of thing.

Poppy moved away, and then Draco stretched out on the bed with her.

“There is very little room,” she said in amusement.

He just raised an eyebrow. “You’re the Transfiguration professor. Transfigure a bigger bed if you must. I’m not leaving you.”

Hermione smiled a little at this and then reached for her wand and did exactly as he said. It was still a rather tight fit, but Draco was holding her so closely she suspected that wouldn’t matter.

“So I was poisoned and you saved me with an antidote then?”

Draco nodded, and Hermione listened as he filled her in on the details he hadn’t discussed with Harry.

“Merlin,” muttered Hermione. “I knew you were an eligible bachelor and all, but she must really be desperate.”

He shot her a look. "I'm not an eligible bachelor. I'm very much off the market. Astoria is just greedy and obsessive. But I hate that she did that to you to try to get to me. I'm sorry, love."

Hermione gave him an incredulous look. "There is nothing at all for you to apologize for. *You* didn't poison me."

"No, but she wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for me."

Hermione heard the guilt in Draco's voice, and she sighed.

"Godric help me, you sound just like Harry," muttered Hermione. "Let me tell you what I used to tell him every time I almost died fighting with him, which happened more than once in my mind you. I'm not a weak person, and I make my own choices. I'm always going to be a target because of who I am and what I stand for, and yes because of who I associate with. But I have never let that dictate my relationship with somebody. I have never let it change my mind if I think I'm doing the right thing. And this thing between us is so right that the Astorias of the world can sod right off. They are going to have to do better than a bit of poison if they want to end what we have together."

She was watching Draco's face as she said this, and he looked like he had been hit by a bludger. Then a look of desperate longing emerged, and he raised a hand to her face to cup her cheek.

"Hermione, I... fuck, I'm probably going to make a total hack of this. I've tried to tell you so many times, and I've even been practicing and talking to my healer about it and even fucking Potter of all people, but I've never had the balls to tell *you*. But... Merlin, Hermione I love you. I'm in love with you. And I watched you almost die tonight, and it was the worst thing I've ever seen, and all I could think about was how I hadn't told you yet because I'm a fucking coward when it comes to this sort of thing. But I do love you. I *really* do, darling. I've never felt this way about anybody before, not even close. I love you, and I want a life with you, and it would have wrecked me beyond words if you had died."

He looked both terrified and resolute as he said this, and Hermione felt her heart explode as she beamed at him. A hopeful look spread across his face at her smile.

"I'm in love with you too, you know. Very much so, and I have been for a while. I have to pinch myself sometimes to believe it's all real... that *you're* real... but it's true. I came to Hogwarts expecting to be alone for the rest of my adult life. I thought it was inevitable, and I tried to be okay with it. But then you just barrelled in and turned everything on its head and swept me off my feet. I realized that you've rounded out my lifelong wishlist, and now I have everything I *actually* want within reach. I have the career *and* the bloke, and it's just unreal sometimes. I've thought about it a lot, and I want a life with you too Draco. I know who you are and what that entails, and I want all of it. I really do."

He looked dazzled by her words and then leaned in for a searing kiss that she returned with enthusiasm before breaking away.

“And while we’re baring our souls to each other, I have to ask. Do you know about my condition? I suspect I told you that night when I took your pain potion.”

He bit his lip and nodded.

Hermione exhaled. “You know I can still have children right? It might not be as easy for me as others, but I can do it. And I’ll confess that this has been a barrier in previous relationships.”

He gave her an odd look now, and she just shrugged. “Ron’s convinced it would be too dangerous or too hard for me to have kids. My relationship with him didn’t survive eighth year at Hogwarts – we couldn’t make the distance work – but he was also convinced I couldn’t give him what he really wanted. You know he comes from a massive family, and he wants that too. He said some hurtful things about it, and I said some hurtful things back. We both apologized to each other eventually, but I can tell he still believes it. And our fight about it has been the elephant in the room ever since... or one of them, at any rate.”

To her relief, Draco looked incredulous.

“I know you can,” he said finally. “I’ve looked into it pretty extensively, as it happens.”

Hermione smiled a little at this. “I rather thought so. But I wanted to make sure you know. It’s the kind of thing that can scare a bloke off. That’s why I didn’t tell you about it.”

Now he eased an arm around her. “Ah but you see darling, you *did* tell me about it.”

“Merlin, I can’t believe I said all those things,” she muttered. “I must have been really high. What else did I say then?”

He smirked at her. “I seem to recall you saying that I’m very pretty and any kids of ours would be pretty too because they would look like me.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped, and then she just groaned in mortification while he chuckled.

“God, that’s embarrassing.”

“Never,” he said. “I can’t tell you how much hope it gave me. I’ve been clinging to that conversation for months.”

She smiled a little and nestled in again. She felt him give a sigh of satisfaction as she relaxed into him.

“Now then,” he said, “you heard Poppy. You need to rest tonight and tomorrow, and then on Sunday I’m taking you somewhere to get away from everything. You know the press is going to be a shitstorm. They saw you get poisoned.”

“Ugh,” said Hermione, as she nodded. “Alright then. Getting away sounds nice, actually. Where are you taking me?”

“It’s a surprise,” he said. Hermione smiled to herself. Of course it would be a surprise with him.

“Well you have to give me a hint so I know what to pack,” she said reasonably.

“No I don’t,” he countered. “Sully will pack for you.”

Hermione leaned back and raised an eyebrow. “You know how I feel about house elves, Draco.”

Draco just kissed her on the nose. “I do. It will be one of those things that we can happily squabble about for Salazar knows how long. But I’ll tell you now that I’m going to win. Sully absolutely loves me so she’s on my side.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she knew Draco was right. “Fine then, Sully can pack for me.”

“Good girl,” he said with a wicked grin, and Hermione unconsciously bit her lip.

“Am I?” she asked.

“Mmmm, I think so,” he said. “And good girls rest now so they have the energy to be *extra* good in a couple days. Sleep now, princess.”

Hermione just shook her head, but she couldn’t help the broad smile that crossed her face as she settled in with him. True, she had almost died tonight but it had finally given Draco the push he needed to really open up to her.

It was worth it, she thought.

By Sunday morning, Hermione was *very* ready to leave the hospital wing and the attentions of Poppy and Draco. They had combined their efforts and forced her to rest, rest, *rest*. She was going out of her bloody mind.

The Daily Prophet the following morning had been nothing short of explosive as it fully resurrected her relationship with Draco for the public before describing the events of her poisoning at the party. Harry, Minister Shacklebolt, and Minerva had all given statements. Draco had not, but the pictures rather spoke for themselves. Surprisingly, the article was overwhelmingly sympathetic, and her near poisoning seemed to put the press’s stamp of approval on their relationship. However, the press was also clamoring for updates about her, so Draco and Hermione had released a joint statement declaring that she was fine and Draco was with her, but they wished for privacy while she made a full recovery. Of course this hadn’t done much to dampen the press’s enthusiasm, and Hermione was thinking longingly of being whisked away by Draco to some undisclosed location.

“We will darling, as soon as you are done resting. We can disappear for a week, and then I’ll take you out in London the night before we go back so the press can see you’re OK,” he said.

Hermione agreed to this plan, and after insisting that she was really *truly* done resting, Draco had finally agreed to produce the portkey he prepared for their “little getaway,” as he called it.

Hermione couldn’t help but notice that the little getaway had involved quite a few visits with Sully and rush owls. She was incredibly curious.

“Nobody knows where we’re going then?” she asked, as she touched her finger to the coat hanger.

“Nobody but me and Sully,” said Draco, as he lifted a bag that looked oddly small for a week-long vacation. “The thing we’re doing... there’s even a mechanism to screen for mail. I can give them a list of people who are allowed to contact us, but I haven’t put anybody on our list. All of our owls will be redirected to the Manor.”

Hermione opened her mouth to ask more about it, but before she could say anything Draco touched the coat hanger too, and she felt herself spinning through the air for several long minutes.

They slammed into the ground, and she found herself out in the bright sunlight, on a dock and staring up at a large boat.

“Where are we then?” she asked curiously as she looked around.

“Crete,” he said casually.

She whipped around to stare at him. “*Crete?* You brought me to bloody *Greece?*”

“Mmmhmmm,” he said, smiling a little as he grabbed her hand. “For now at any rate. Come on.”

He led her down the dock a little ways until finally he approached an even larger boat on the end. “This is us,” he said.

Hermione was rooted to the spot.

“What?” he said in amusement. “Never been on a yacht before?”

Hermione gave him an *are-you-kidding-me* look. “Of *course* I’ve never been on a bloody yacht!”

He just laughed and grabbed her hand to pull her on board the boat. “I told you we would disappear for a week, didn’t I? No better place than the middle of the sea.”

Hermione just gaped as he pulled her on board, and she looked around at the enormous deck with the polished wood, ample seating, loungers, and what looked like a large daybed. There was a table and chairs with an elaborate spread of food, already laid out for lunch. There was

an awning that covered half of it to give them a choice of sun or shade, and Hermione saw something that looked to be a large bedroom through a door that led to an enclosed cabin space.

“The pool’s on the other side of the boat,” commented Draco offhandedly as he led her to the table.

“Oh my *God*, Draco,” she said, and he just laughed again as he helped her into her chair.

As soon as he sat down too, she felt the boat start to move, and she looked around in amazement.

“Now then,” said Draco, evidently totally unperturbed by this. “It’s never too early for a drink, and then we can start our vacation.”

Hermione accepted a glass of wine from him and sipped cautiously, still in disbelief. He, however, looked utterly relaxed.

“Is this something you do often then? Yachting?”

He shrugged. “We went most summers growing up, yeah,” he said. “Though Mother always liked to stop in the ports to shop.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “And this particular yacht...”

“It’s chartered,” he said casually. “I have my favorites, but I like to try new ones every now and then. We used to have one but then Father wanted to try something different one year. It’s a fucking pain in the arse to buy and sell them every time you want to change things up.”

He took a bite of a sandwich as he said this so matter-of-factly, that Hermione found herself gaping again.

Bloody hell.

“It’s just us then?” she asked cautiously.

He raised his glass to her and nodded. “Yes. We don’t have to see another person for the next six days.”

She looked down at the beautiful lunch and back at the coastline that was starting to disappear. “But surely there must be a crew.”

He shrugged. “It’s crewed by a small team of elves.”

“Draco...” she started, but he just rolled his eyes at her.

“Honestly, Hermione, they *like* it. In the social hierarchy of elves, yacht elves are close to the very top. And they *are* paid and have certain rights that house elves in England don’t have. Most of the Mediterranean countries have laws to keep them safe. The industry depends on it. They work for a never-ending rotation of guests who are wealthy, bigoted pricks who

drink too much and think they're entitled to anything they want. Trust me, the elves serving us this week are very well-protected."

Hermione sat back, surprised by this but rather pleased. He must have seen the look on her face because he looked a bit relieved before saying, "You won't see them at all unless we ask them to appear. They will give us total privacy. So we can do anything on the boat we want to do."

She noticed he was looking her up and down as he said this last part, and Hermione started to blush as he smiled a little.

"Six days huh?" she finally said.

He inclined his head. "Six days, mon coeur. For this sailing at any rate. They're going to take us south until we're just off the northern coast of Egypt since it's warmer down there this time of year, but we'll just stay in the water this trip. If you like it, we'll come back this summer."

Hermione felt a broad smile break across her face, and Draco's eyes gleamed.

"Eat up then," he said. "I want my dessert as soon as we're away from the coast."

Hermione bit her lip, but ate quickly, and before long Draco was pulling her up from the chair over to the cabin. "Get changed princess, and then come out for dessert," he said, handing her the small bag.

Hermione gave him a questioning look. "Changed into what?"

"Surprise me," he smirked, as he opened the door and gently pushed her through it before closing it behind her.

Hermione just shook her head as she made her way into the cabin and took in what it had to offer. She saw a generously appointed bed with a seating area on one side, and to her surprise a large table in another corner that had a bookshelf behind it filled with novels, board games, and even a couple jigsaw puzzles. There was a small bar next to the table with a counter to serve food.

Draco, she realized. They would be here for nearly a week, and he had planned ahead to make sure she was fully entertained.

She poked her head in the bathroom and saw it was also well-sized with a large whirlpool tub and separate shower with double vanity, along with a pair of robes hanging on the wall.

God, how is this my life now?

She had been asking herself this for months, and once again she pinched herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

Taking a deep breath she moved back to the bedroom to open the bag and find out what Draco meant by getting changed. She snorted as she pulled out her vibrator, a large book of

crossword puzzles with a box of pens, a couple jars of something with Draco's handwriting on them that said, "lube," and "mild pain potion," and finally several pieces of lingerie that she didn't recognize – several bra and panty sets, a garter belt with some stockings, and several very sheer nighties. There was absolutely nothing else inside.

"Oh my God," she said, now realizing he had packed no clothes for her.

Granted, she was a master of transfiguration so she knew she could conjure *something* that kind of looked like clothes if she absolutely had to. But she rarely did it because her sizing was always off. This was why she still purchased clothes from shops.

Draco, of course, had learned this about her, and so he had intentionally left her with almost nothing at all to wear.

Now noticing that there was nothing in the bag for *him*, she walked to the wardrobe and opened it, only to find plenty of clothing for a wizard in his size, but nothing in hers. A deep heat bloomed inside of her as she realized this was going to be part of their dynamic all week.

How the hell did he know this turns me on?

She had no idea how he had figured it out, but then again, Draco was the most observant person she had ever met. The few times they had ended up like this – him mostly clothed and her mostly nude – he must have realized what it did to her.

Submissive light.

Taking a deep breath now Hermione went back to the bag and slowly took her clothes off, folding them neatly on the end of the bed before pulling out a bra and panty set in Slytherin green. She smirked as she put it on and then slowly made her way to the door to emerge on the deck. She saw Draco had removed his outer robes, but he was still dressed, and he was lounging on the daybed with his wine as he patiently waited for his "dessert."

He looked at her hungrily as she approached him.

"I noticed there seemed to be a few things missing from the bag," she said as she stood in front of him with her hands on her hips.

"Did you now?" he asked as he sipped his wine and looked her up and down. "I rather thought Sully remembered everything. She even found that mad book of crossword puzzles for you."

Hermione tried not to smile, but she couldn't help it.

"I've told you before I like you in green," he said as he studied her critically. "It's a good color for you."

Hermione dipped her head a bit in acknowledgment of this.

"Now then darling, why don't you go fetch the fruit from the table and bring it over here? It appeared just a moment ago."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, but turned around and headed back to the table.

“Take your time,” he called after her. “I’m enjoying the view.”

Hermione gave an exaggerated bend as she picked up the platter of fruit, and she heard him mutter “*fuck me*,” behind her along with the rustle of fabric.

She smirked. He might be the dominant one, but it was so easy to push him.

She slowly turned around again and brought the fruit back over to him, and he gestured toward a low table nearby.

“Take your bra off and come lay down,” he said.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this, but she slowly unhooked her bra as he watched and then laid down next to him. He ran a hand over her before turning to the fruit to select a piece. He picked a cherry and bit it in half. As he ate one half of it, he ran the other half of it over her breasts and stomach, staining her skin red from the juice.

She felt her breathing getting shallow as he picked up a jar of honey and drizzled a small amount across her nipples and toward her navel.

“A little sweet, a little sour,” he said as he placed the honey just so. He ran his fingers through it before bringing it to her mouth to suck.

The sweet explosion, along with the feeling of his fingers in her mouth made Hermione’s eyes flutter closed. As soon as her eyes were shut, she felt his tongue licking up the honey and cherry juice, all along her nipples and stomach, and Hermione moaned into his fingers.

“That’s my girl,” he muttered. “Those tits are so sweet today, aren’t they?”

He proceeded to lick every bit of it off of her, and Hermione was writhing by the time he was done.

“You want me, pretty girl?” he asked, and she just groaned.

“Words, darling.”

“Yes, Draco, *please* ...”

He hooked his fingers through the waistband of her knickers and pulled them down so she was naked on the daybed.

“Then be a good girl and touch yourself. Show me what you can do. Give yourself one really good orgasm, and then I’ll give you another.”

Hermione gave a shuddered breath. He had never asked her to do this for him, though she knew he loved to look at her. She heard him stand up and pull a chair over so he could sit and watch, and Hermione looked up at him with hooded eyes.

“I have the best view in the house,” he said. “Spread those legs for me and let me see how wet you are.”

As usual, Hermione started to get lost in his words as she did exactly what he said, and she saw he had positioned himself to study every bit of her clearly.

“Tits and clit, princess,” he said. “Tits and clit.”

Hermione closed her eyes and allowed herself to just feel: the sun on her skin, the waves crashing around her, the wind in her hair, and her hands on her own body. She slowly began to massage herself with one hand while the other dropped between her legs, searching for that little bundle of nerves she had gotten to know so well during the previous term. She could feel his eyes boring into her as she started to rub it, gasping at the sensation as she pressed down.

“Harder,” she heard him say, and she opened her eyes just a fraction to find him staring at her hand between her legs like his life depended on it.

She pressed harder and arched as a moan escaped her lips, and she heard him mutter, “fuck,” as his own hands dropped into his pants.

“You’re so fucking hot like this,” he said to her. “You have no idea what this does to me. Keep going. Harder and faster love.”

Hermione did as he said, gasping as she started to crest. Her eyes flew open, and she found him studying her with an intensity she had never seen before. As soon as she came, she heard him stand and then he surprised her by reaching down and flipping her over onto her stomach before pulling her up on her knees.

“I gotta get in you,” he said roughly, and she quickly opened for him as she felt him sink himself inside of her with a groan.

Some part of her brain knew he was still completely dressed except for his cock, which he had pulled out of his pants, and she was totally naked. This realization made an unbearable warmth drop between her legs as she leaned down over the bed, but then her brain started to shut off and she just began to feel.

“Gods just like that...” he groaned as he started to thrust into her. “How are you this fucking wet for me? So perfect...”

She keened at the praise, and he ran one hand down along her spine, which made her arch hard in an almost reflexive way.

“You like that...” he said to himself, and he did it again, and her back dipped hard to send her arse was straight in the air with him inside of her.

She was shaking now, so very close to another orgasm, when she felt him wrench himself out of her before stroking her back again, to make her present. To her shock she suddenly felt his

tongue in her folds instead of his cock, and she knew he must be crouching below her as he sucked and licked.

“*Oh God,*” she groaned as she came apart around his mouth. Her face was practically in the cushion now, but she felt him grab her by the hips and flip her over once more onto her back.

“I want you to suck me,” he said gruffly, and Hermione lifted her head a bit as he guided his cock into her mouth. He braced himself against the back of the daybed as he suspended himself over her, and Hermione opened her throat to let him in as far as he could go.

“That mouth...” he moaned as he thrust into her. His breathing was getting ragged, and Hermione knew he was very close.

“Gonna paint your tits,” he gasped as he pulled himself out of her mouth just as he started to come, and then he was spurting all over her chest and neck.

Hermione’s heart was pounding as she stared up at him, and he looked back down at her, eyes wide.

She started to sit up, but he pushed her back down gently. “Leave it,” he said. “Stay right there. I’ll be back in a minute with my wand to clean you up.”

Hermione just nodded, too tired to protest, and she felt him roll off her as his weight disappeared.

Hermione closed her eyes as the sun hit her body again, waiting for him to return.

Six whole days of this.

Chapter 22: Points of Entry

Chapter Notes

A/N: Mind the tags please - if any of them make you uncomfortable, now is the time to skip down to the first stars.

Draco

Draco hadn't stopped congratulating himself for devising this little getaway ever since he watched Hermione walk out in lingerie for the first time. They were totally alone, out in the middle of the sea with just a few elves that kept up a stream of food and drink and fresh towels for them. Hermione hadn't worn a stitch of clothing except for scrappy lace and sheer nighties and occasionally a small robe for the last three days. Most of the time she wore nothing at all.

Like right now.

"I can't believe you packed swim trunks for yourself and nothing for me," she said as she straddled him in the pool one evening and kissed him. "Bathing costumes can be risque, you know."

"Mmmm, but how could I resist the opportunity to watch you skinny dip?" he asked, as he ran his hands up and down her sides and over her nipples. "I love having you like this. In fact, I love you. Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"I have some idea, yes," she said as he worked toward her neck. "You've been shagging me in the middle of the Mediterranean for the last three days."

"These have been the greatest three days of my life," he responded seriously. "I'm never ever going to get enough of you."

She sighed contentedly as she let him kiss down to her breasts, which had become sunkissed and turned golden brown over the last several days. With no audience but him, Draco had taken delight in watching Hermione sunbathe in the nude for hours each day as she worked on her crossword puzzles, casting only the lightest sunblock charm for safety.

"No tan lines," she said.

Her honey skin practically glowed as the sun set, and their kissing became deeper, but still unhurried as they enjoyed the water that was charmed to be the perfect temperature.

“Tell me, pretty girl,” he whispered in her ear. “How many points of entry do you have?”

Hermione pulled away for a moment to look at him in confusion.

“Points of entry?”

“Mmmhmm,” he said. “Points of entry. All the places my fingers or cock could go. Let’s count them, shall we?”

Hermione raised her eyebrow curiously, and Draco lifted his fingers to her mouth. “Open up,” he said. She did as he said, her gaze heating a bit, and he slipped his fingers inside.

“So that’s one,” he said, as she sucked. After a moment he gently removed his fingers before running them back down her front and lifting her off his lap ever so slightly.

His fingers teased her folds open, and he pressed them inside of her as her breath hitched a little. “And that’s two,” he said, wriggling his fingers just a bit before pulling them out again and dragging her against him.

“So two points of entry,” he whispered in her ear. “Is that the correct answer to my question?”

“Yes,” she breathed back, and she still sounded a bit perplexed. Draco smiled to himself against her neck.

Draco moved his hand around to her back and stroked it for a moment before it drifted down.

“Mmmm, wrong answer,” he said. “Not at all up to your usual standards,” and then he skated his finger down the cleft of her arse, right across the top of the pucker. He felt her gasp and shudder. “You have three,” he whispered.

He continued to brush it lightly, and she was pressed into him so close now.

“What do you say? Want to try something new?”

“You would... want to do that?” she asked quietly.

Draco pulled her back so he could look at her face. She looked very nervous and even a little embarrassed.

“I love every part of you,” he said, seriously. “Every single part.”

Her eyes were huge. He could see she was nervous but he also could tell she was very intrigued. His adventurous Gryffindor girl was ready to come out to play.

“Go slow?” she asked. “It... I’m afraid it might hurt.”

“Of course,” he said instantly. “Remember your safe word?”

“Crookshanks,” she said.

“Good girl. I’ll go very slow for you. Just my hands to start. And if you don’t like it, say your word, and I’ll stop.”

She took a deep breath, and closed her eyes for a moment before nodding. “OK.”

He pulled her back to him and kissed her deeply, trying to convey to her that he wasn’t going to hurt her. He lifted her for a moment to subtly pull his cock free from his trunks before reaching for his wand and a jar of special lube that he had placed under a nearby towel earlier in the evening. He muttered a spell toward her, and she gasped as she felt herself become internally clean.

“Merlin,” she muttered, and he just chuckled. Then he waved his wand toward the jar, and the lid opened, and he dipped a couple fingers inside.

“My own invention,” he said. “Repels water. I’m thinking I might market a whole line of sex potions. We’d probably double our fortune darling.”

He felt her relax a little as she chuckled.

Good, he thought.

For the last three days he had been thinking about the best way to ease her into this, and he soon discovered she became totally relaxed in the pool. He had zeroed in on it as the perfect spot. The minor issue of water washing away most lubrication had been solved weeks ago when he invented this new potion while fantasizing about taking her in the bathtub. He hadn’t tried it yet, but he mentally congratulated himself for remembering to pack it.

He pulled her to him again, and he kissed her neck as he rubbed one finger’s worth of lube over his cock. She gasped as he gently slid into her, smoother than ever, despite the water around them. He began to move just a bit, and he felt her relax into him at the familiar intrusion. Once he felt her melt, he carefully parted her arse cheeks and stroked on the outside of the rim with one finger. She was clinging to him, and he felt her breathing become labored as she waited for it.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he breached her bum with his other lubed up finger, and she shuddered and moaned at the feeling. He held it in place for a moment to get her used to it.

“OK?” he whispered.

She nodded frantically, still breathing hard. Draco would normally make her talk to him, but he could tell she was having trouble stringing words together. She was doing the best she could given the circumstances.

“Can you take any more for me princess?”

She shuddered, but again nodded, and Draco smiled to himself as he very slowly eased in a second finger.

Hermione groaned as he widened her, and he groaned too. Gods but she was perfect. He could hardly believe she was letting him do this to her. He was touching her in a place

nobody had *ever* gone before, and the intimacy of it nearly overwhelmed him.

“One day you’re going to take my cock into you just like this,” he murmured to her. “You’re doing so good mon coeur.”

She was gasping for breath now, and Draco forced himself to hold his fingers still as he started to pump his hips more firmly.

“Oh God...” she said. “Draco, I’m gonna...”

“You can do it, Hermione. Let me feel you come just like this, pretty girl.”

He felt her convulse, and she buried her face in his neck as she moaned. Normally Draco lasted longer than this, but he was so turned on by what they were doing that he couldn’t wait. He shuddered too as he pumped himself into her. She was still clinging to him as he eased his fingers and cock out of her and picked up his wand to vanish everything. He put his cock back into his trunks and then held her close. She was trembling.

“That was... that was...” she said.

Draco realized she was having an emotional response to it too.

“Shhh,” he said as he held her. “You did such a good job.”

Slowly, ever so slowly he felt her relax into him before she pulled back a little.

“Is that another thing you used to explore... before me?” she asked hesitantly.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “No, actually. I’ve only had fantasies about it. Fantasies you just brought to life, I might add.”

She looked stunned, and he smiled at her a little bit.

“But... but you seemed to know what to do...” she said in a confused voice.

He shrugged. “I’ve been dreaming about bugging you for months darling. I’ve thought through every aspect of it in explicit detail.”

She looked at him in surprise. “I can’t believe I got some of your firsts... there were the toys and now this...”

He smiled at her. “Hmmm you’re forgetting a few others.”

She furrowed her brow. “Like what?”

“Let’s see...” he held up a hand to tick them off for her. “First time taking a witch on an actual date, first time asking a witch to be in a relationship, first time having sex in my own bed, first time spending the night together, first time giving a witch *any* gifts at all, first time taking a witch on vacation, first time falling in love...”

Her eyes were huge now, as she listened to all of this. “You’ve gotten a lot of my firsts,” he said simply.

She pulled him in and kissed him frantically as he smiled into her mouth.

She needs to hear this, he realized, as he pulled back. *She still thinks she’s the inexperienced one.*

“I really don’t know what the hell I’m doing, Hermione,” he said quietly. “I’m sort of making it up as I go. My sexual history is nothing compared to all the things I’m still figuring out. I know where I want to end up with you. I dream about it so much. But all the stuff I’m supposed to do so that I can actually get what I want? Fuck, I’m clueless.”

Her eyes softened. “We get there by talking about it,” she said. “We have to tell each other these things, and we’ll figure it out. You’re really good at pushing me to try new things physically. So let me push you emotionally. Tell me, Draco. What do you want?”

His breath hitched, and his heart started to pound. They had been dancing around this for so long, and she had implied she wanted it too. But could he really do this? Could he have an open conversation with her about it?

Instinctively he brushed a finger across her stomach, and she gave him a knowing look.

“You’ve done that before,” she said softly. “When we’ve... touched on this sort of thing in the past.”

He nodded. “I’m afraid it’s too fast,” he said. “I don’t want to scare you away.”

There. That’s safe to say. And it’s the goddamned truth.

She looked at him thoughtfully. “Maybe I should tell you what I want. And then you can tell me if it bothers you or scares you. No judgment, yeah?”

The knot in his stomach eased a little. He could do that. There was absolutely nothing she could possibly want from him that would scare him.

“Yes,” he said quickly. “Yes, let’s do that.”

“Alright,” she said slowly. He could tell she was steeling herself for something, and he was suddenly struck with gratitude for the fact that she was going to put herself out there first.

“I’d like to marry you and have kids at some point.”

Draco’s heart nearly exploded. “That’s what I want too,” he said quickly. “So badly.”

She smiled a little. “Alright then. What’s your ideal timeframe?”

He shrugged. “The day we’re back on dry land?”

He was completely serious, though she laughed at it.

Alright not that soon, he thought with a little disappointment. But she didn't seem to be scared off by his eagerness. That bolstered him.

"That's a little soon for me," she admitted. "And I think the media would crucify us for it."

Draco frowned a bit. "I thought you don't let the media dictate your life."

If it's just the media holding her back I'll buy the fucking Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly...

She bit her lip at this and gave him a look like she was considering his point. "The media's not the only thing. But I do think we should consider how they would treat us if we came back from break already married."

His face fell a little. "Oh."

She gave him an encouraging smile. "I'd like to marry you at some point, but I don't want to elope. I want our friends and family to see us do it, and knowing your mum she may want a big society wedding. I'd be fine with that, but it takes time to plan that sort of thing. And as tempted as I am to just go off my potion tomorrow – and let me be clear, I have actually fantasized about it – I really don't want your heir showing up five months after the wedding. I don't even know how we would manage the logistics of that, and our lives are far too public for it. For the next fifty years the media would say that I trapped you into a marriage. I don't want that for any of us."

Draco felt almost lightheaded with disbelief as she said all of this to him.

"You've really fantasized about it?" He brushed her stomach again.

"Yeah," she whispered. "I have."

"Gods Hermione, I've been fantasizing about it too. For months now. It's all I've been able to think about. Well that and tying you up and bugging you..."

She gave him a brilliant smile at this and started to laugh. "We can do it, Draco. We *will* do it. But we should do things in a certain order to stay on the right side of the media. And I think we should do it openly. I really think Harry and Ginny are making a mistake by trying to hide their engagement."

"I agree with you there," he acknowledged. "It's going to cause a fucking shitstorm when the news breaks."

Hermione just nodded. "I think we're on the same page then."

Draco exhaled and put his forehead against hers.

"I love you so much. I just... thank you for telling me. I've been spiraling in my head about it for months. I should have just talked to you."

"It's hard," she whispered. "It was hard for me too. But I think we want the same things, yeah? Or mostly?"

“Definitely. I’ll admit, I’m an impatient bastard, but you’re right about all of it. We don’t need to be in any huge rush, and we should do things in a certain order and out in the open.”

Something inside of Draco began to unclench now, and it was making him feel warm and settled again. It took him only a moment to identify what it was: he was Savoring again. He was finding Joy.

“Now come to bed princess. All of this talk about weddings and babies is getting me hard. We need a lot of practice before we make my heir.”

She giggled as he hauled her out of the water and wrapped a towel around her. Then she shrieked as he lifted her over his shoulder and swatted her lightly on the rump as he made his way inside the cabin.

“Draco!” she laughed.

“I’m just crossing the threshold with you arse-first love,” he said. “You earned it tonight.”

Hermione

The last three days of their trip passed in a haze of sex and love and intimacy. Hermione felt nearly drunk from Draco’s affection, especially after their confessional in the swimming pool. They hadn’t talked about it again, but she sensed that Draco was finally unburdened.

The perpetual undercurrent of things he couldn’t quite say had disappeared, leaving only contentment, satisfaction, and a delicious soreness between her legs.

On their final night the yacht elves truly outdid themselves with a multicourse meal that Hermione ate while completely starkers, and it drove Draco so crazy that he tied her down to the daybed and had his way with her as soon as they were done.

Like the previous time he started slow at first, building her anticipation until she was quivering for him, desperate for any sense of touch. This time he edged her, bringing her ever so close to climax before pulling back again, over and over until she was pleading with him, absolutely begging him to fuck her ragged.

When he finally did, she came so hard she nearly passed out again, and he brought her to climax twice more in rapid succession until she found herself floating in that same hazy place where time and space melted away.

“I’ll be here Hermione. Stay where you are for as long as you want darling.”

And so she did, drifting in and out of the crisp night air for several, blissful long minutes until slowly, slowly she opened her eyes to find herself under the covers of a blanket she didn’t

remember, with Draco massaging her and watching her with a look of utter satisfaction on his face.

“Good?” he asked.

“Amazing,” she sighed, before that odd lump in her throat rose again, and she buried her face into his chest.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I’m not,” he said simply, and Hermione relaxed again as the odd sensation eventually passed.

When she was finally calm again he leaned back and smiled a bit. “Better?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “This whole week has been so lovely. I don’t want to go back.”

He smiled down at her. “I’ll book us another charter for the summer, yeah? Longer next time. Maybe we’ll actually make it into a port.”

She smiled at this.

“But to be clear,” he clarified, “If you’re on the boat, you should be naked or nearly so.”

Hermione laughed, in total agreement with this plan. Then Draco suggested one last thing.

“It’s a nice night. Let’s sleep out here.”

So Hermione snuggled in as Draco warmed their blanket, and they drifted off to sleep together in the large daybed under the stars of the sea, wrapped up in each other as always.

The morning of their departure held another surprise for Hermione.

“I thought you might want to see Knossos before we go back,” he said. “It’s muggle so I’ve never seen it. It’s supposed to be incredible though, and we’re docking in Heraklion.”

Hermione was a bit surprised he had ever heard of it, but he just shrugged. “I told you I studied art as a child. A few of the famous artists in history were wizards, but most were muggles, and they interacted openly with each other until the Statute of Secrecy went into place. So wizarding art influenced muggles and muggle art influenced wizards. I studied both. Father never really cared for it, but Mother was in favor. She’s always liked that sort of thing, at least in the abstract. But she would only tour the art that ended up in magical areas, and that was only when I could tear her away from her shopping in the first place. I haven’t seen much of it in person.”

“I haven’t either,” said Hermione softly. “My parents were always more of the outdoor adventurous sort. Lots of skiing, lots of hiking, lots of camping. That’s a big reason I sent them to Australia during the war. There’s plenty of opportunities for that sort of thing there. I’ll admit it came in handy when I had to camp with Harry for months during the war, but I always wanted to see more historical things on our holidays. I did get them to take me to France once, and we visited Dijon and spent a few days in Paris. But that’s the only trip I can remember that was focused on sightseeing. And now that they don’t have me around they’ve really leaned into their adventurous side. They actually give scuba diving lessons, even though they’re retired. It’s called Wilkins Diving School. I actually took lessons and learned to dive from them a couple years ago, though of course they thought I was a regular student instead of their daughter.”

Draco looked at her incredulously as she explained the concept of scuba diving.

“I would never,” he said shortly. “Bubble head charms are far more reliable. You say they could actually run *out* of oxygen?”

Hermione just laughed and assured him that diving was a very safe sport when certain precautions were taken. “But that should give you a flavor of the kinds of things they like to do,” she added. “They were never much for sightseeing, unless we had to hike to the top of a mountain to get there first.”

“Apparently they’re Gryffindors as well,” he muttered.

And so after a lovely breakfast and the very odd feeling of getting dressed for the first time in six days, Hermione and Draco disembarked and apparated straight to the ruins.

“This is amazing,” she breathed as she climbed through the ruins of the ancient Minoan palace, reading placards as she went. “It dates back to around 1600 BCE. The throne is still here, and they even had indoor plumbing. And you say the Minotaur was actually real?”

“Sure was,” said Draco as he studied the famous fresco of the bull jumpers with keen interest. “Clitus the Younger. He was a wizard who tried to turn himself into a bull animagus, but it went all wrong. He ended up transfiguring only his head, and then he wandered into the palace. They thought he was a monster so they trapped him, and he never did get his transfiguration reversed.”

“Good lord,” said Hermione in amazement, as she considered this. “I’ve never heard that story.”

He shrugged. “We sailed around this part of the Mediterranean a good bit when I was a boy. I was always interested in it.”

The surprise stop at Knossos was almost as surprising as the stop for lunch in a muggle place, where Draco pulled out something that looked suspiciously like a muggle credit card to pay.

“Excuse me?” she asked as she gestured toward it. “What on earth is this?”

He just rolled his eyes at her. "It's tied to my vault at Gringotts. The goblins can do global currency exchanges behind the scenes with a muggle credit card. That's how I pay for things in the muggle world. And ever since I learned they could do it automatically, I've had our financial advisor invest in the muggle stock market for us. It's done really well."

He laughed at the look of utter shock on her face.

"Diversification, love. That's what he's always telling me."

Not long after this he held out the coat hanger, and Hermione sighed as she prepared to return to the real world. It soon turned blue, and Hermione found herself spinning through the air for several minutes until she landed with a jolt in the foyer of Malfoy Manor.

"Draco! Hermione!" called Narcissa's voice as she came down the large staircase. "You've both had about a hundred owls over the past week. It's been absolutely mad. How are you, dear? Everything alright?"

She said all of this very quickly as she kissed first Draco and then Hermione on the cheek before stepping back to look at Hermione critically.

How am I? Why is she... oh.

The last week had been so lovely Hermione had nearly forgotten she had been poisoned a week earlier.

"Oh, I'm wonderful, actually," said Hermione. "Draco suggested a getaway, and it was just the thing. Very relaxing."

He smirked at her behind his mother's shoulder, as Narcissa smiled.

"You both look like you've spent a week in the sun."

"We sailed south of Crete toward the northern coast of Egypt," he said casually. Narcissa turned to raise her eyebrows at him, but Hermione thought she looked rather pleased.

"A lovely part of the world," said Narcissa. "I'm glad you took some time to recover, though you should know that the press has been relentless while you've been gone. I told them you two were just taking some time to yourselves instead of spending the break at the Manor, but of course I couldn't tell them where you were since I didn't know myself. There are rumors that Hermione actually died since nobody has seen either one of you since Horace's party."

Hermione winced a little, but Draco just rolled his eyes. "I'm taking Hermione out tonight. They'll see us."

"Good," said Narcissa, looking relieved.

"Any news on Astoria?" asked Draco with a dark look.

Narcissa looked uncharacteristically perturbed. "No, actually. She's vanished. Harry came by yesterday to say that her parents have cut her off. He confirmed it with papers from

Gringotts, so she has no source of money. It's only a matter of time before she resurfaces, but it's still odd."

Hermione felt a frisson of fear at this, but pushed it down, focusing instead on the dangerous look that crossed Draco's face.

"I want her locked up," he said to nobody in particular.

Hermione put a hand on his arm, and he looked down at her.

"Harry will get her," she said quietly. "He always does. *Always*. He can trace anything, Draco."

"It's taking a fucking long time," he said angrily.

"It's only been a week," said Hermione in a soothing voice. "Just a week, and it sounds like he's already restricted access to her parents and her vault. He'll flush her out. We'll be safe here tonight, and we'll be back at Hogwarts tomorrow. She can't touch either one of us."

A muscle in Draco's jaw twitched, but he nodded as he ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "Fine," he said. "I'll go through the letters and let you know if there are any you need to respond to. Care to join me in the library while I read them?"

Hermione smiled agreeably to this, and Draco called for Sully to take her very small bag to his room before leading her away. As they left, Narcissa called out, "Enjoy you two!"

This caused Draco to crack a smile for the first time since he got home. "She's about ready to wet herself with excitement," he muttered to Hermione as they walked away.

Hermione snorted at this, but had to admit it was a relief that Narcissa seemed so keen on her. Lucius, however...

"Still questioning if I know what I'm getting myself into with you," said Draco as he read one of Lucius's letters with a frown. Then he gave her a wicked smile. "I would say that I know *exactly* what it's like being in you."

"Tell Lucius that then," said Hermione, rolling her eyes. "Really Draco, you should rehire his solicitor."

Draco snorted at this. "Not for a few more weeks."

Harry had sent daily updates though he knew they were both traveling and wouldn't see them right away. Draco seemed a bit mollified to read all the steps Harry had taken to close in on Astoria.

"Potter's taking it seriously then," he said quietly.

"Of *course* he's taking it seriously," said Hermione. "It's me."

Then there were multiple letters from Rita Skeeter, all of which Draco burned without reading them.

“That woman is mad,” he said.

At long last having caught up on their correspondence and press, Draco sent Hermione to his room to get dressed.

“Sully picked up something from your closet at Hogwarts,” he said.

Hermione arrived to find a dress that she knew had been black but that Sully had charmed green.

“Master Draco is saying he likes green on you, Miss,” said Sully.

Hermione rolled her eyes, wondering when on earth Draco had told the elf this, but accepting the dress nonetheless. She donned it and with a brief freshening up in the loo was ready.

Draco smiled when he saw her. “You look fantastic, darling.”

Hermione blushed, but just took his arm.

“Where to then?”

“Albertson’s,” he said, sighing. “It’s nothing like Palate, but it’s nice enough, and they have a tendency to alert the press whenever somebody notable has a reservation.”

Hermione nodded as he led her out of the door and down to the end of the lane. “I’ll apparate us,” he muttered as he spun into the darkness.

A moment later they landed, and a moment after that there was a flash that caused Hermione to blink rapidly.

“Miss Granger! You’re alive!” shouted a reporter.

“Well of course I’m alive,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

“Where have you been? You haven’t been seen since your poisoning!”

“I’ve been on holiday,” she said shortly. Then she glanced to the side. “With Draco of course.”

“Where?” asked the reporter eagerly.

“Greece,” said Draco, as he started to pull Hermione into the restaurant.

“Miss Granger, do you have any information about Astoria Greengrass?”

Hermione paused. “No,” she said quietly. “Only that she’s obviously a very jealous and disturbed young woman. I’m certain Harry Potter and the aurors will find her.”

“Are you looking for her too?”

“No,” insisted Hermione. “I’m a teacher, as is Draco. We will be returning to Hogwarts and our duties tomorrow. As I said, we took a holiday so I could fully recover.”

That’s not the only reason, she thought as she caught Draco’s smirk.

“You say you went on holiday together. Did you get engaged?” asked a reporter that Hermione recognized worked for *Witch Weekly*. The other reporters stopped writing to listen with rapt attention.

Hermione exchanged a glance with Draco.

“Not yet,” she said with a small smile.

“But I may be visiting the goblins soon,” added Draco. “If Hermione decides she can put up with me for the next century.”

And with that little bomb the reporters gasped and the cameras started to click as Draco pulled her in for a kiss. Then he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her forward toward the restaurant.

Hermione was struggling not to laugh as they were seated.

“Honestly, I think you gave them all a heart attack!”

He shrugged and grinned. “You’re the one who said we should be open about it.”

“Hmmm true. I’ve already decided I want to put up with you for the next century though. I thought I made that rather clear in the pool the other night.”

“Noted,” he said with his eyes twinkling. “Though hearing you say it when I don’t have you naked and satisfied in the middle of the sea is also encouraging. Most days we’ll just be grading papers together.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” she said with a small smile. But then she hesitated.

“What?” he asked, and she could see her hesitation made him nervous.

“It’s just... how long do you plan to work at Hogwarts?”

“However long you’re there,” he said, looking at her like she was a bit mad for asking.

“Well I had always thought I’d spend my whole career there.”

“Then so will I,” he said. “My contract was shorter than yours, but I talked to Minerva about it just after the new year. We’re going to extend my contract to match yours.”

She looked at him in surprise, and he just shrugged.

“Well have you... I mean I know we want kids at some point. I just... how do we do that? Logistically I mean, with our jobs? My contract is for four more years.”

He just smiled at her comfortingly. “I had Sully do some reconnaissance for me about that. There’s an unused staff apartment in the castle for professors who marry each other. It has several bedrooms in case they have a family. Apparently it hasn’t been used in over two hundred years, but it exists, and the elves maintain it. As for child minding and such... well, we have Sully and the other Manor elves, along with my mother. I imagine any kids of ours would live with us at Hogwarts, but they would also spend a lot of time at the Manor during the day when we are teaching. When they’re a bit older we could arrange for private tutors like I had or we could send them to the nursery school in Hogsmeade if you want to go that route. Or both.”

Hermione’s eyes were wide. She could see it. It sounded so simple and so lovely.

“So I wouldn’t have to give up my job... or wait until my contract expires for us to start?”

“Absolutely not,” he said firmly. “You can have whatever you want mon coeur. If you want to teach, you can teach. If you want to stay home, you can stay home once your contract is up. And I’m going to be wherever you are. I really enjoy teaching too, but there’s always research for the potions company to give me something to do if you ever want to leave Hogwarts. Regardless, I’m certainly not going to be living in a different place as you or my children during the school year. I’d go mad.”

Hermione smiled so broadly she thought her face might be breaking. “You’ve really thought about this haven’t you?”

Draco smiled too. “I’ve been fantasizing about it for months. At some point it occurred to me I should figure out the logistics too.”

Hermione had a sudden thought that made her grin.

“What would it be like teaching our kids?”

He gave her an amused look. “They’ll be Slytherins of course. Excellent quidditch players, top potions students, probably a dab hand at transfiguration too. Our son will sow his wild oats. And I’ll cock block any wizards who even look at our daughter and put them in detention for the rest of term.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “What kind of paternalistic double standard is that?!”

He looked totally unabashed. “I’m just telling you the truth, love. Any girl of ours won’t be losing her virginity until she’s consummating her marriage. Preferably a year or two after the actual wedding.”

“Merlin,” said Hermione, rolling her eyes at him. She was torn between annoyance and amusement.

He just gave her a smug look as he sipped his drink. Hermione shook her head at him. “Well I suppose we can work out details like that as we go.”

“Cheers, darling.”

Chapter 23: Proposal

Chapter Notes

A/N: Again, please mind the tags. If they make you uncomfortable, skip Hermione's first section.

Draco

"Draco, long time no see," said Healer Robinson as Draco stepped through the floo.

"I know, sorry about that. I've been rather busy the last few weeks."

"It's no problem. I'm here when you need me. I've been saying for ages that you can ramp down our meetings whenever you want."

Draco nodded. He had to admit that the last year and especially the last term had become more sporadic with Healer Robinson. He had been doing weekly meetings like clockwork ever since his Ministry-imposed sessions were complete, but they had moved off that schedule a bit. Then again, when he entered Hogwarts Draco was a shell of a person trying to heal and navigate his way between familial expectations and what he really wanted to do in life. But after finding Hermione, those two things finally dovetailed. She had done as much to heal him as his sessions with Healer Robinson had.

"I may be ramping down. It's sort of happened naturally. But I don't think I'll ever stop the mind healing completely. It helps me sort things objectively."

Healer Robinson looked pleased at this, and nodded. "Very well. What's on the agenda today then?"

"I need you to tell me when to propose to somebody. And how to do it."

Healer Robinson's eyebrows flew up, and he got an amused look on his face. "I take it you've discussed this with Hermione then? Like we talked about?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah, I... finally told her that I'm in love with her after she was poisoned. And then we went on holiday, and we talked about getting married and having kids and all. She's on board. But I was thinking about it, and I realized we didn't really touch on *when* I'm supposed to propose. She just said she wanted an engagement and didn't want to elope once the holiday was over."

Healer Robinson was struggling to hide his smile. "You suggested eloping?"

“Well we were on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean for a week. So yeah, I may have suggested getting married as soon as we were docked, and she told me that was too fast. But she’s been clear that she’s willing to marry me in general. So I’m not sure... do I do it before the school year is over? Or during the summer? Or like a year from now?”

Now Healer Robinson couldn’t help it. He started to chuckle.

“Draco, I obviously wasn’t privy to your whole conversation with her, but I’d wager she just wants to make sure she can have an actual wedding. You probably could have proposed to her on the boat if you were ready to do it then.”

Draco’s eyes widened as his stomach flipped. “You think?”

Healer Robinson shrugged. “If you two want the same things, then sure. It sounds like you two have discussed it. You know what her answer would be. I doubt her answer would be any different today versus a year from now. Besides, there’s no rule about how long engagements have to last. If you proposed tonight, she could always say yes and then schedule the actual wedding for a year from now. Or even two years from now. Getting engaged is just a declaration of intent. It doesn’t create any fixed timeline.”

“Fuck me, I blew it,” said Draco, now groaning. “I had her on a fucking yacht for a whole week! And we talked about it halfway through our trip so I had time for it! But I didn’t give her a ring...” Draco dropped his head into his hands.

Healer Robinson was smiling now. “Draco, did she seem to be even the least bit disappointed?”

Draco exhaled as he thought about it. “No, actually. She seemed to love the trip. And the yacht.”

Healer Robinson snorted. “I imagine she did. So that means you didn’t blow anything. In fact, you probably set it up nicely. Sometimes a little space between a conversation like that and the actual event itself is a good thing.”

Draco bit his lip as he frowned. “Is this about Savoring? Because after we talked about getting married and kids and all, I finally started to Savor again.”

Healer Robinson inclined his head a bit. “Partially. There’s no need to jump to the finish line. But it also gives you both time to digest it. You can really think about it. And it’s not so spontaneous that you wonder later if you just got caught up in the moment.”

Draco sighed. “I suppose you’re right. And I didn’t have a ring with me anyway. Just getting the trip pulled together in time was really challenging. It was very last minute.”

“Well you don’t have to give her a ring to get engaged,” started Healer Robinson. Draco shot him a look, and he held up both hands. “*But* I will acknowledge that it’s fairly traditional, and based on what I know about you, it strikes me as the kind of thing you would want to do for her.”

Draco nodded firmly.

“Very well, then,” said Healer Robinson. “You take the steps you need to take first. Buy a ring or find one from your vault that you think she’d like. I do recall reading something about visiting the goblins in the papers,” and his eyes twinkled.

Draco smiled reluctantly at this. “Yeah, I’m going to. I want her to have her own.”

Healer Robinson nodded. “There you go then. You do that first and once everything is ready to go, you ask her.”

“But *how*?”

Draco got the impression Healer Robinson was struggling not to roll his eyes. “You just *do*, Draco. I’ll admit it’s nerve wracking. Hell, my wife even picked out her own ring, and I was still having a mental breakdown when it came time to actually do it. But you just take a deep breath and ask. If you know she wants to marry you, then she will say yes, however you decide to go about it.”

Draco stared at Healer Robinson hard as he thought about this. “How did you propose then?”

“I took my wife to a nice dinner in muggle London, and then I proposed on Tower Bridge later that night.”

Draco’s eyebrows went up. “That sounds nice. Did she like it?”

“Well she said yes,” he snorted.

Draco smiled at this. “And do you know how Potter did it?”

“I do, actually, but you know I can’t tell you about it. You’ll have to ask him.”

Draco grunted at this. He knew Weasley had gotten engaged recently too. It had made the papers, and according to the article he read Weasley took Lavender Brown to a professional quidditch match first with box seats.

Hermione would hate that.

“I need romantic ideas,” he blurted out.

Healer Robinson actually did roll his eyes at this. “No you don’t, Draco. You can ask around to find out how others did it if you need some inspiration, but you should think about Hermione and what you two like to do together. I’m sure you’ll come up with something. I’ve added ‘hopeless romantic’ to your official diagnosis, you know.”

Draco smiled reluctantly at this. “Fine. I’ll ask around then. But I’m pretty sure the thing we like to do together the most is shag.”

“Then ask her while you’re shagging her,” he quipped.

Draco rolled his eyes, but laughed.

“In all seriousness, I’m certain you’ll think of something she’ll love,” said Healer Robinson. “Now tell me about the circumstances surrounding her poisoning. I imagine that’s been stressful for you.”

Draco exhaled and nodded, and they spent the rest of their session talking about everything Draco felt while watching Hermione get poisoned and Draco’s efforts to heal her. By the end of it Draco felt emotionally drained but also like some of the anxiety from that night and the following day had finally been leached out of him. He hadn’t even realized how much he was hanging onto it.

This is really why I see a mind healer; he reminded himself. This is why I need to keep coming.

When their hour was concluded Draco stood. “Thanks. I know I’ve been leaning on you for some unconventional advice recently.”

Healer Robinson smiled. “I don’t mind. It makes for a nice break from the norm. And who knows, maybe I’ll expand my practice to include couples therapy.”

Draco grinned. “I’ll tell *The Daily Prophet* that you get all the credit for getting Hermione and me together.”

Healer Robinson smiled at him. “No, Draco. You and Hermione found each other and did the hard work yourselves. And that’s why it’s going to last.”

And that’s why it’s going to last.

Having learned to take Healer Robinson’s advice seriously, Draco did ask around.

He pulled Potter aside at a dueling club meeting in early May.

“No word of Astoria?”

“None,” said Potter. “But you saw the reports. She pulled a lot of gold out of Gringotts the night she disappeared before we got the vault locked down. We figure it could last her a couple months, but she’s going to run out eventually. And then she’ll have to emerge.”

Draco nodded. He didn’t like it, but he knew Potter was right. And Hermione was safe at Hogwarts. Astoria wouldn’t be so stupid to try to get back into the castle again.

“In that case, let me ask you something else. How did you propose to Ginny?”

Potter gave him a sharp look. “You’re planning something then?”

Draco shrugged. “You’ve seen the papers I’m sure.”

Potter inclined his head in acknowledgment. “I have, that’s true. I never know what to believe though.”

“Believe it,” said Draco shortly. “But I have no idea how to do it.”

Potter gave him a reluctant grin. “Yeah, Hermione would be a difficult one, I’ll grant you that. Fine, then. For Ginny I took her to Palate and then took her to the cemetery in Godric’s Hollow to meet my parents. I proposed in front of their memorial.”

Draco just stared. He couldn’t decide if it was romantic or tragic.

“Did she... like that?” he asked hesitantly.

Potter nodded. “I think so. It was only the second time I’ve been there myself since I was a baby. The first time was with Hermione on Christmas Day when we were on the run during the war. Ron had left us for a bit, and we were attacked. I nearly died, but Hermione saved my life. So Godric’s Hollow became this awful place for me where both of my parents were killed, and I nearly died twice. I avoided it after that, but when I finally told Ginny about it, she pointed out that I lived there as a baby with parents who loved me. I had a lot more happy days in Godric’s Hollow than shitty ones, even if I couldn’t remember them. She told me she wanted to go with me sometime and make a happy memory there that I *could* remember. So that’s why I did it.”

“Fuck,” Draco muttered.

Potter nodded.

“Did you just do it then? Or did you build up to it or what?”

Potter gave him an assessing look. “If you ever repeat this, Ferret, I’ll cruciate you. You know I have authorization to do it.”

Draco smirked. This must be good.

“Fair enough Potty.”

Potter just snorted at this.

“Fine. I was so fucking nervous I threw up all over the sign that appears in front of their memorial. Ginny had to clean me up, and I proposed on the ground instead of on one knee. I don’t even remember if she said yes or not, but I assume she did because she took the ring from my pocket and started wearing it around the Burrow the next day.”

Draco snorted. “That’s fucking incredible.”

Potter gave him a reluctant smile. “Yeah. So I’m sure you’ll be able to do better than I did. Although, Ron told me he threw up too, but he actually made it to the loo during their quidditch match. Lavender has no idea.”

Draco just shook his head. *Prepare to be sick first. Got it.*

After Potter, he interviewed his father. Draco had considered just asking Narcissa about it, but he didn’t think his mother would be able to contain her excitement if she was certain Draco was making preparations. And besides, he owed his father a visit. He hadn’t seen him since before the school year began.

“So you’re finally here then, are you?” sneered Lucius.

“Yes, Father, I needed to ask you something.”

Lucius just snorted. “Something that couldn’t be put in a letter? That’s all you’ve given me since you went to that blasted school.”

“You know I’m busy. And I write to you frequently.”

“Yes, busy getting involved with a mud—” Draco shot him a stern look.

“Fine, a muggleborn.”

“Yes, precisely. And that’s what I wanted to talk to you about, actually.”

An incredulous look crossed Lucius’s face as he raised one eyebrow.

“How did you propose to Mother?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I want to know how you proposed to Mother. I’m trying to collect ideas.”

“Fucking hell, boy. You’re actually going to propose to this...witch?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “I’m sure you’ve seen the papers.”

“You know as well as I do that the gossip columnists are just that. I’ve been hoping it was all just rumors and you would come to your senses.”

“All of my senses are telling me to marry Hermione. And if you want the title to stay in the Malfoy line, you’ll see how sensible it is too. I’m not creating an heir with anybody else but her.”

Lucius’s nostrils flared, and he was silent for a long while. Then he said, “Fine then. I asked your mother in the rose garden at Malfoy Manor one night. Candles, champagne, the works. The elves outdid themselves.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully. “Did you get sick first?”

“What the hell boy? What kind of question is that?”

“I’m just curious.”

Draco noticed Lucius turning very red. “You *did!*” said Draco in amazement. “Fuck me. Okay. I guess I better be ready for that part too.”

“This is unbelievable,” muttered Lucius.

Draco just grinned, and Lucius looked at him like he was crazy. “Thanks, Father, that’s all I needed.”

He started to turn around and Lucius said, “Wait!”

Draco turned back and gave him a questioning look. Lucius looked like he was debating something, but he finally said, “You’re going to need the spell too. If you’re actually serious about this.”

Draco furrowed his brow in confusion. “What spell?”

“The spell that ensures a male heir,” said Lucius. “The title and the Manor is entailed on the male line. You know that.”

“I thought Malfoys always produced boys though,” said Draco in confusion. “That’s what you have always told me.”

Lucius actually rolled his eyes at this. “Honestly, Draco, don’t you think that at some point in the last nine hundred years there would be a generation when a girl would come first? You know that a girl has never come first. It’s always been a boy. Always. Some of our ancestors also produced a second boy to have a spare. We’ve only had a few ancestors who have had girls at all, and *that* has only happened after the line to the title was secure and the heir survived all the common childhood illnesses.”

Draco shifted uncomfortably. He knew this of course, but it had never occurred to him that the Malfoy history of always having boys was somehow enhanced by magic.

Sex education.

“Fine then. What does this spell do?”

“It ensures that your seed is all male,” said Lucius. “There will be no possibility of a girl if you use it correctly.”

Draco shifted uncomfortably. “And how long does it last? Surely not forever, since there have been a few girls.”

“It’s short-lived. It only lasts a couple days at most. It’s best to cast it on yourself before each attempt to be certain. The instructions are in a book called *Natural Order*. It’s in the Malfoy library with the books on blood wards.”

Draco's stomach gave an odd squirm at this. Something about it made him very uncomfortable. He *knew* he had to have a boy at some point if the title would pass, but to do it *that* way...

Goddammit, I need to see Healer Robinson again.

One thing was certain. Draco wouldn't be casting this spell on himself without Hermione's input. He exhaled as he thought about it.

I'll talk to Healer Robinson about it, and Hermione and I will decide together.

Shaking himself out of it, Draco just nodded.

"Good," said Lucius. "And one other thing. I want you to hire my solicitor again."

Draco rolled his eyes, but said, "Fine. But I'll fire him again if you're rude about Hermione."

"Yes, you've made that rather clear," said Lucius with a sniff.

"Is that all then?" asked Draco, as he started to turn around again.

"No," said Lucius. "I want to know... when are you doing this... thing?"

Draco just raised an eyebrow. "Whenever I'm ready. I'm sure you'll read about it in the papers. I've decided to Savor a bit first."

Lucius gave him an odd look at this but said nothing more as Draco turned and left, thoughts swirling in his mind.

Maybe I was supposed to be Draca instead of Draco. Fuck, why is my family is so screwed up?

Hermione

"*Rictumsempra!*" Hermione shouted, and to her delight she landed a hit on Harry, who collapsed on the floor and started to laugh hysterically.

"*Stupefy!*" she cried, and he was out.

The students started to clap, and Hermione caught Draco's eye. His eyes were dark, and he intentionally licked his lips and as they stared at each other.

Godric help me.

Now that she and Harry no longer used lethal spells against each other, most of Draco's concerns about her dueling had disappeared, leaving only the "erection factor" behind. Based on the look on his face, she was sure he was going to give it to her good tonight. He always seemed particularly turned on whenever she won.

Hermione felt her face heat as she turned to revive Harry.

"Good one, Hermione," he said, as she helped pull him to his feet. "I owe your boyfriend fifty galleons."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She couldn't help but notice that their wagers had slowly been escalating all term.

"Now then," said Dawlish. "More practice with stunning tonight!"

The students paired off, and Hermione, Harry, Dawlish, and Draco started walking through them, correcting techniques and aim.

As she passed close to Draco she felt him brush her bum with his hand, and she reddened again.

"*Honestly*," she hissed. He just smirked at her.

She passed near David Fawley, whose face was screwed up in concentration.

"*Stupefy!*" he shouted, and a light red spell emerged.

"Excellent David," came Harry's voice, as he walked over too. "That was fantastic."

David's face fell. "But it's not a strong one. Yours is dark red."

"I'm also a lot older than you," said Harry. "You're what? Eleven? Twelve?"

"Twelve," muttered David. Harry nodded. "I didn't try stunning *anything* until I was fourteen, nearly fifteen. And I wasn't very good at it until closer to sixteen or seventeen, after I had my growth spurt. It's one of those spells that takes a lot of power, and power builds as you age and practice. The fact that you can produce anything at all at twelve is impressive."

David turned beet red and looked a little mollified at this. Harry smiled, and he and Hermione started to move off when Hermione heard David call, "Sir!"

Instinctively she turned around to listen.

"You can call me Harry. We're second cousins," he said, giving David his lopsided grin.

David smiled a little, though he looked a bit embarrassed. Hermione knew that he practically hero-worshiped Harry. And for his part, Harry had connected with David's parents over Easter break. Little David Fawley returned from break practically on cloud nine that his hero

had come to his house, and they had determined that they *were* in fact related. David's parents hadn't been lying to him about it.

Looking at them next to each other, Hermione was struck again by how similar they looked. Evidently the Potter genes that favored dark, messy hair and sharp features ran strong.

"Yes, well... I was wondering sir... I mean Harry. Oh bugger," said David, and Harry and Hermione both chuckled a little. David tried again. "I was just wondering if maybe you could teach me more defense over the summer? I love defense. It's my best subject by far."

David was scarlet now, and Hermione was a bit surprised he had worked up the courage to ask Harry this. Then again, David was a Gryffindor.

Harry's eyebrows flew up. "Sure, David, I can do that. Though you know there's a no magic outside of school rule for summers..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You know it's undetectable in wizarding households. David could come to Grimmauld or you could go to him. The Ministry would never know. *You* only got caught because you did magic in a muggle household, and there was no other wizard around you who could have cast those spells."

David's eyes were huge as he stared between Harry and Hermione. "True," said Harry, smirking now. "Though in my defense, the first time it happened it was actually a house elf and not me."

"Yes, but then you blew up your aunt, and *then* you fought those dementors," reminded Hermione. "That's why they tried to expel you."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "They tried to expel me because of that Umbridge toad. But you're right, I only got caught because it happened in a muggle area."

Then he turned back to David whose jaw was hanging open. "You almost got expelled?" David asked in awe. Hermione rolled her eyes. If David thought Harry was his hero before, she could tell Harry had just become practically mythic.

Harry chuckled. "More than once, actually. I'll tell you about it sometime. But back to defense lessons... I'm in, as long as your parents are okay with it. My place has a ballroom where Hermione and I... err, I mean Professor Granger and I used to practice our dueling. I assume Professor Granger wouldn't rat us out."

"Of course not," said Hermione, snorting now. "I've always thought it's a bollocks rule. Besides, this would actually be supervised practice. I think it's a fantastic idea."

Harry nodded in agreement, and David's eyes were shining now. "Awesome, Harry. Thank you! I'll owl mum and dad tonight!"

Harry just chuckled as David hurried off. "He's really grown on me. Thanks for telling me about him."

Hermione just smiled as she moved off too. She caught Draco's eye several more times, and her blood heated at the looks he was giving her. By the time the dueling club was over, Hermione was as randy as she had ever been, and she made her way eagerly back to their room.

Draco appeared a moment after she did.

"Strip," he said as soon as the door was shut. "All the way."

Hermione faltered a little, but stared at him as she quickly kicked off her shoes, pulled her dueling top over her head, and then peeled her yoga pants off. She saw Draco was quickly undressing too, and the moment they were both naked he grabbed her and spun her around to bend her over the desk in her room.

Hermione gasped as he swiped at her. "You earned yourself a good fucking tonight, pretty girl," he said. "You know I love watching you kick Potter's arse."

Hermione groaned as she naturally presented. She was more than ready, and she loved it when he just took her like this. Draco brushed her bum one more time before burying himself in her.

"Fuck yes," he breathed as he started to go, and Hermione looked behind her to see his head thrown back and his eyes closed as he thrust into her. Hermione closed her own eyes as she felt herself start to shake. She always came apart so quickly like this, and he knew it. He was long enough to hit that special spot at this angle that always made her break.

She heard herself shout and shake, and her knees gave out, but Draco didn't let up.

"God Draco," she gasped. Hermione felt him pick up speed and the last vestiges of her control snapped.

Before she was fully aware of where she was again, Draco had pulled himself out and picked her up and tossed her on the bed. Hermione was nearly disoriented as he climbed in next to her.

"Get on top of me princess. Face away so I can see that perfect arse while you ride me."

Curious, thought Hermione, but she pulled herself together to do just that. He rarely let her have any semblance of control and this was a bit different.

She threw a shaky leg over her and allowed herself to sink down on top of him, as he groaned. She started to move and turned around to find him staring at her arse just as he said he would.

"Lean forward," he gasped. "I wanna see..."

Hermione leaned onto her hands and started to move, and Draco made a strangled sound behind her. This was pretty good for her, but she could tell it was excellent for him, and he was quickly losing his grip.

She heard a muttered curse behind her and then an odd noise, but she didn't look back. She was too focused on driving Draco mad. She nearly jumped with surprise when she felt that odd cleansing charm and then his finger in the cleft of her buttocks, just like that night in the pool. He had only done this one other time since, and he had talked her through it that time too. This time he was just going for it, and Hermione took a deep breath and forced herself to relax as he intruded.

God, but it was a delicious feeling. It did hurt a little bit, but in a way that felt like she was stretching instead of anything truly painful. She didn't think it would make her come by itself, but with his cock in her too she was so unbelievably full that she gasped.

"Yes," he said. "Just like that... Fast or slow, whatever you want princess."

Hermione noticed that this time he was keeping his hands in place and wasn't moving with her. As she rode his cock she was riding his fingers too.

Oh this is different. But so good.

Hermione slowed a moment before adjusting to the feeling and then started to pick up speed. She shifted her angle ever so slightly, and now he was deep inside of her, and she was drawing out every bit of pleasure she could find from him.

She could hear him groaning too and knew he was close, but he was desperately hanging on for her to go first. She let herself just feel and move and suddenly *there*.

That was the angle. That one, right there.

Hermione broke again, and not a moment later Draco did too. She collapsed face forward onto the bed as Draco removed everything from her, and then she felt another cleansing spell as their mess disappeared.

"Are you okay mon coeur?" he muttered.

"Urgh," she just said.

He gave a deep chuckle. "Come here then. You're facing the wrong way."

Hermione crawled over to him and collapsed on his chest with a soft flump.

"That good, huh?" he asked in a cocky voice.

"You're insufferable sometimes, you know that?" she muttered.

"But you love me anyway," he said, and she could hear him smiling as he said it.

"Yes, I suppose I do."

“Hermione, I can't wait any longer for you love. I'm going to be late!” he called to her.

“Then go Draco. I promise I'll be there to watch!” she called back from the bathroom.

“But don't you want to see me in my flying uniform first?”

“I know what you look like!”

She heard him make a little discontented sound, and she couldn't help but laugh. She could tell Draco was pouting. She knew the way she looked at him usually stroked his ego before a match, but she had overslept and was only just now getting out of the shower to get ready for the quidditch final.

“Fine, but you had better be eye-fucking me from the stands princess! I expect to see it before kick-off!”

“That won't be a problem!”

Hermione chuckled again as she heard the door to their room open and close again before she turned back to the mirror as she towed off. While it was true that the last match of the year usually had the nicest weather, the fact that it occurred so close to final exams had always baffled her.

Honestly the students should be studying!

But despite the poor timing, Hermione had to admit that even she was always excited to watch the final match, especially when Gryffindor was in the running for the cup like they were this year. It would be Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw, and given that she was nearly a Head of House by this point, Hermione decided to dispense with neutrality and show her true colors for the first time all year.

She put on her muggle jeans and donned one of Harry's old quidditch jerseys that she had nicked for this very purpose. Harry, she knew, would be in the stands today too, along with Ginny of course. They were both planning to spend the whole day at Hogwarts, first with the quidditch final this morning and then with the last meeting of the dueling club after dinner.

She smirked as she thought about Draco's reaction to seeing Harry's name on her back. He'd probably pin her down and tease her until she was begging for it to get his revenge.

Studying herself in the mirror for a moment she pulled some earrings out of a small, magical jewelry box Draco had randomly gotten for her one day and put them in her ears. Hermione reached over to close the jewelry box and unconsciously her eyes lingered on the padded area that was supposed to hold rings. She bit her lip as she thought about it.

When would he finally do it?

He had seemed so eager to marry her that day on the boat that Hermione had been half expecting a proposal any day now. But for some reason he hadn't, even though he had had

several opportunities since then. He took her on another “piano date” in the Room of Requirement that Hermione was *sure* was going to end on one knee, but instead it ended in a very hot snog. And then he had taken her to dinner and a show in muggle London one weekend, but nothing had come of that either.

She sighed. She knew she was being ridiculous. He still made the occasional comment about their future, so she was sure he still wanted to do it. But since he hadn’t done it during his earlier opportunities, she had no idea when to expect it. They were both so busy at Hogwarts that she knew she would have to bide her time. Minerva had warned her that the end of the year was the worst, and sure enough, the mountains of homework they both had to grade had become truly excessive. They had taken to eating dinner together on the patio most evenings because it was the only private time they got together.

Soon they would be administering final exams and then would spend the following week grading them and tabulating final scores for the students. And then once *that* was done she would be going straight to Grimmauld Place for a full two weeks to help Ginny and Mrs. Weasley with last-minute wedding arrangements.

Draco himself had also been unusually busy with a number of weekend meetings for his family’s affairs and the potions company. He explained he couldn’t ignore things completely, even if he outsourced quite a bit of it. He was trying to get ahead before Harry’s wedding.

Yes, they had both been very busy, and it would only get worse in the near future.

Patience, Hermione. Patience.

Forcing these thoughts aside, Hermione sighed and shut the jewelry box with a snap. She quickly dried her hair and applied a little make up, and then took one last look at herself in the mirror before heading back to their room.

She started to make her way to the door when she realized she left her wand in the bathroom. She swore under her breath and turned back toward it when she heard the sound of her balcony door opening and a cry of “*Stupefy!*” Instinctively Hermione spun around and caught just a glimpse of Astoria Greengrass’s face before the red light connected, and it all went dark.

Chapter 24: To Sleep and Not to Dream

Chapter Summary

TW: Discussion of addiction and substance abuse.

Draco

Draco glanced up in the stands just as he was about to kick off for the game.

Where the fuck was she?

He caught the dark head of Potter and the flash of red hair from Ginny Weasley in the stands, but the lighter brown curls of Hermione weren't with them. Normally she didn't take this long to get ready, but for some reason she was taking her sweet time this morning.

Draco knew he shouldn't be so put out about it. It wasn't like she hadn't seen him in his flying uniform a dozen times before. But dammit, she always looked at him like he was good enough to eat, and he wanted his ego stroked a little.

He *knew* he should have woken her up earlier, but she had been so adorable in her sleep and up so late the night before grading that he couldn't bring himself to do it. And now because of his generosity he wouldn't be able to see her give him a clear once over until after the match was done.

Damn.

Deciding he couldn't wait any longer, he blew his whistle and everyone kicked off, with Draco keeping one eye on the game and the other eye on the stands to see when Hermione would finally arrive.

At long last Draco saw Hermione hurrying across the grounds from behind the castle instead of through the front doors.

That's odd, he thought, but he shrugged his shoulders as he watched her make a beeline for the stands before hesitating awkwardly. Draco couldn't watch her like he wanted to of course, because he had just seen a Gryffindor beater foul one of the chasers.

But as the chaser flew forward to take a penalty shot, he eyed Hermione curiously as she finally made her way into the staff box and hesitated again.

Also odd, thought Draco. She looked like she didn't know where she was supposed to go, but then Potter waved her over, and she made her way slowly toward him to sit down and turn her attention toward Draco and the game. Draco saw she was sitting rather stiffly, but seemed to be making small talk to Potter and Ginny, both of whom had their eyes fixed on the game.

Shrugging to himself again, Draco turned back and began to fly again until he suddenly noticed what she was wearing.

Potter's quidditch jersey? She was wearing Potter's fucking quidditch jersey?

That little *minx*. Draco really wasn't the type to be into punishment, but holy mother of Merlin was he going to get her good tonight. And now the reason she was so damn late became clear to him too. She must have been waffling about what to wear and finally decided to push Draco's buttons by wearing that fucking jersey.

Strike one: showing up so late I don't get the eye-fucking she promised.

Strike two: wearing that dickhead's jersey.

He found himself in a real snit, but also uncomfortably turned on as he considered all of the ways he could get her back tonight. Of course he wouldn't *punish* punish her. That wasn't what he did. But he could tease her and edge her and get her so hot for him that she begged him for it before swearing to never *ever* do it again.

Just as long as there was no strike three. If there was a strike three Draco might actually have to spank her.

"Hmph," he said as he scowled and turned back to the game.

Draco continued to cast annoyed looks her way as the game dragged on.

On and on it went, and before long the sun was high in the sky and it was time for lunch, but still no snitch.

Draco jealously watched the house elves deliver food into the stands, and the quidditch teams started rotating in their reserve players one by one so the starters could eat. But Draco had no reserve so he continued to fly.

Fuck I'm starving.

Another hour passed and everybody but him was fed and watered, evidently perfectly ready for this game to last through the afternoon. Draco just groaned. If only the snitch would appear.

Hermione, he couldn't help but notice, kept checking her watch and every so often left the stands, presumably to go to the loo. The fifth time this happened Draco furrowed his brow.

Is she sick? But she didn't seem sick, just stiff and obviously bored.

The game continued all afternoon, and eventually Draco was wondering what the hell they would do if the snitch wasn't found before nightfall. He was nearly faint with thirst and hunger, and the sun was starting to lower.

Suddenly he heard the crowd gasp, and the seekers tore off toward a small glint of gold at the other end of the pitch.

Oh thank fuck, he thought with relief as he whipped his broom around and followed the seekers to ensure a clean catch.

Mercifully he didn't have to foul them, and the Ravenclaw seeker edged out Gryffindor for the win.

He pointed his wand to his throat. "490 to 380 Ravenclaw," he announced dully before flying straight to the staff box and landing in front of Hermione, Ginny, and Potter. He winced as he got off his broom. Nearly eight hours in the air *hurt*.

"Are you okay Malfoy?" asked Ginny with concern. He just nodded before looking at Hermione.

"Look, we have dueling club in an hour. I'm going to eat something and get cleaned up, and I'll meet you there."

"Oh but didn't you want to eat with us? I heard there's a party in the staff common room..."

He looked at her oddly. There was *always* a party in the staff common room. Then he eyed her quidditch jersey again and felt another lurch of annoyance. Between the way the day had started and the way it had gone, all fantasies that Draco had harbored that morning about teasing her relentlessly had disappeared. Now he was just hungry, sore, and irritated.

"No, I don't have time," he said curtly. "I'll get dinner with the students before I shower. Like I said, I'll see you at dueling tonight."

They all nodded, though Hermione had a worried look on her face. Draco knew he should feel bad by how short he had been with her, but he was too hungry and sore to think about it.

Food, then shower, then pain potion, then I'll think about Hermione.

He mounted his broom, wincing a bit as he did so, and flew straight to the entry hall where he dismounted and made a beeline for dinner.

Draco hardly paused to look up as he inhaled the food and gulped the pumpkin juice. After twenty minutes his brain finally caught up with his stomach as he breathed a sigh of relief and slowed his pace.

No longer lightheaded, Draco allowed himself to think about Hermione again and winced internally. Sure, she had done something to intentionally tease him, but it wasn't like it was her fault the match had lasted all damn day. He had been rude. He owed her an apology.

Sighing again, Draco finished his meal and checked his watch. He had thirty minutes before dueling club, and his sensitive nose told him he smelled terrible. He still needed a shower, and that wouldn't give him much time to pull her aside and apologize. He resolved to be friendlier to her during dueling club, and then he would apologize once they were finally back in their room together.

Nodding to himself, he rose and made his way to the staff common room, where he saw Hermione talking to Potter and Ginny in one corner. Or rather, Potter and Ginny were talking to each other, and Hermione was standing there checking her watch.

She didn't notice him, so he slipped down the hall toward their room for a much-needed shower. He stripped down as he turned on the water and went to the medicine cabinet to find a pain potion while he waited for the water to heat. He opened it and did a double take.

There was a bottle of dreamless sleep.

He furrowed his brow as he stared at it. He was *sure* he hadn't seen it the last time he was in here, though admittedly it had been a couple weeks ago.

Was she taking it again?

This possibility made Draco deeply uncomfortable. The emergency stores of dreamless sleep at the Manor were kept under lock and key with elf magic so he couldn't touch it. But she *knew* his history with it, and he was almost certain she had a similar history as well, or nearly. It was dangerous to bring it into their room.

He grabbed one of his milder pain potions before grabbing the bottle of dreamless sleep and flushing it.

If she had relapsed and was taking it again for some reason, he knew he would help her. But he was struggling to process how he was supposed to feel about it. He had thought his dream potion was working very well for her, but evidently not. And if she *was* taking it again without telling him about it, then why had she left it in their medicine cabinet where he could find it?

Unless she wanted me to find it? A cry for help?

Draco didn't know what to think, but they clearly had a lot they needed to talk about tonight. He tried to push his disturbed thoughts out of his mind until he could get some answers from her.

The shower was hot now, and Draco sank onto the bench as he let the pain potion and heat work its magic into his sore muscles. Slowly, finally, Draco felt himself coming back to the land of the living as the food and potion and heat soothed his battered body.

At long last Draco shut off the shower and rose to towel off, as he checked his watch.

Shit, he was running late.

He quickly threw some clothes on, grabbed his wand, and made a beeline out of the door.

He passed through the common room and saw that Hermione, Ginny, and Potter were no longer there. Dawlish was nowhere to be found either.

Muttering a curse under his breath, he rushed out of the staff common room, down toward the Great Hall again. He walked in right as he heard Potter say, "Ready then Professor Granger?"

Draco looked around and saw that she was still dressed in her jeans and quidditch jersey instead of her dueling clothes.

What the...?

"Erm, ready for what?" she asked.

Now Potter and all of the students were staring at her in confusion.

At that moment all the odd things he had noticed that day fell into place.

"*Stupefy!*" Draco shouted, pointing his wand toward her. She turned in surprise, but the spell caught her and she collapsed.

"Malfoy!" shouted Potter, who was hurrying down from the stage, with his wand drawn and looking angry. "What the hell...?"

"That's not Hermione," he said curtly.

Potter's eyes widened, and to Draco's utter shock he listened to Draco and trained his wand on her instead. The students around them slowly backed away.

"You're certain?" said Potter quietly, and Draco saw his eyes were narrowed as though thinking hard. He must be mentally revisiting all of his encounters with her that day.

"No, but too many things were off about her today, and I noticed an odd thing in our room when I showered just now," he said under his breath. "If it really *is* Hermione we can revive her once we're sure it's not polyjuice."

Potter looked thoughtful. "Things were off... you're right, she's been really quiet all day."

Potter bit his lip but then shook himself out of it. "Right then. Auror Dawlish? Can you handle the students without us tonight?"

Dawlish just nodded mutely as Potter levitated her. The students parted for them in silence with stunned looks on their faces as Potter led the way out, with Draco following close behind.

Draco now felt himself spiraling into fear for the real Hermione. Where was she? She must have been missing since just after breakfast.

As soon as they got to the entry hall Draco raised his wand. "*Accio Marauder's Map!*"

“Good thinking,” said Potter. “It will show us who this is.”

Draco was momentarily diverted. “Wait, really? I summoned it to find Hermione.”

Potter nodded. “Well that too of course. But yes, polyjuice doesn’t fool it. The map never lies.”

A couple seconds later the piece of parchment came whizzing toward Draco, and he caught it and muttered, “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.”

The familiar ink began to expand on the page, and Draco quickly turned to where they were standing.

Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, Astoria Greengrass

“It’s Astoria,” he said, and Potter nodded with a look of dark satisfaction on his face. “Now Hermione...”

Draco scanned the map and didn’t see her on that page. He flipped quickly until he found the section of the map with their rooms on it.

Hermione Granger, it said, and she was on their balcony of all places. Draco stared for a moment. She wasn’t moving.

“She’s on the balcony in our room. I need to...”

“Go,” said Potter. “Check on Hermione and take her to the hospital wing. I’ll take Astoria there too and meet you.”

Draco nodded quickly and shoved the map back in his pocket as he ran to the staff common room.

“Interhouse unity!” he shouted, and the door opened. He burst in, and the few professors who were in there turned around to look at him in surprise.

“Draco, what...?” started Horace.

“We caught Astoria,” he said tersely. “She’s been polyjuiced as Hermione all day. I have to find her.”

Their eyes were huge as Draco ran down to the corridor and into their room. He flung open the patio door, which he only now noticed was unlocked, and he skidded to a halt as he looked around in the darkness.

There, in the corner, he saw an odd lumpy form of what looked to be blankets. He moved over to it quickly and pulled them off to find a nearly-naked Hermione underneath, unmoving and with her eyes closed.

“Oh Merlin,” he muttered as he felt for a pulse, and to his great relief she had one.

He pointed his wand to her and said, “*Rennervate*,” but she didn’t stir.

“Not stunned then...” he muttered to himself.

Remembering the potion he had found in their medicine cabinet he leaned forward and closed his eyes as he inhaled around her mouth. There he smelled it: that slightly tangy smell he would never forget that was dreamless sleep potion.

“Fuck,” he muttered. He had no idea how much she had been given, but she had been out all day. He gathered her in his arms and lifted her, and then he saw that she had been laying on a broom.

That’s how she got in then.

He and Hermione had never thought to blood ward her balcony door. It had never occurred to them that somebody might fly up to it and try to get in that way. Mentally kicking himself about it he held her close as he brought her back into their room.

He knew she needed to see Poppy right away, but he paused long enough to lay her on the bed first and put a dressing gown on her for a little privacy. Then he lifted her again and made his way out into the staff common room, where the staff members were huddled around worriedly.

“Draco, is she...” started Horace.

“Drugged,” he said. “Dreamless sleep. But she’s had far too much. I’m taking her to Poppy.”

They all nodded quickly and stepped aside for him to exit, as he hurried to the hospital wing. He burst through the doors and saw Poppy was there and Minerva was too. They spun around when they saw him.

“Merlin,” muttered Poppy. “Here, put her down, Draco.”

“She’s had dreamless sleep,” said Draco quickly. “I found a bottle of it in our room, and I can smell it on her. Quite a lot of it too since she’s been out all day. You know she has... a history with it.”

Potter shot him a knowing look, and to his surprise Minerva did as well. Poppy just pursed her lips as she started to cast diagnostic spells “Very well.”

They waited anxiously until Poppy said. “She was stunned first. Then given quite a lot of dreamless sleep. I’ll give her a blocking potion for it so she doesn’t sleep past tomorrow morning, but she’s already absorbed so much she may just have to withdraw.”

Draco’s heart sank. He remembered the withdrawal from dreamless sleep all too well. Once you became dependent on it you had to keep taking it or risk the shakes and cold sweats and terrible nightmares.

At least she won’t have to deal with the nightmares.

The nightmares were the thing, more than anything, that kept pushing Draco back to dreamless sleep when he was on it. He hoped that was true for Hermione too because that shouldn't be an issue this time. He made a mental note to check his stores of his dream potion. She would need to take it every night for at least a couple weeks.

"And Astoria?" he asked, glaring at the false Hermione who was still under Potter's wand.

"That was a powerful stunner you sent. She's not waking up anytime soon. I need her to turn back into herself before I take her in for questioning though," said Potter. "It will cause a lot less confusion that way. I'm thinking we have thirty minutes."

Draco just nodded, as he tried to breathe. He hated her so much. *So much.*

But we got her, he kept telling himself. *We got her and she's never going to hurt Hermione again.*

Draco settled in next to Hermione and grasped her hand. He'd be here all night.

Hermione

Hermione woke up with a groan.

"*Hermione...*"

"*Hermione...*"

Hermione could hear some voices calling to her, but she felt *terrible*. She was nauseous and shaking and felt like she had chills all over her body. It was almost like having the flu, but *so* much worse. In fact, the only time she had ever felt this poorly before was...

"Dreamless sleep overdose?" she murmured.

The voices around her halted abruptly.

"Yes, love, you're withdrawing," said the voice of her boyfriend. He sounded incredibly worried and so upset she forced her eyes open.

"I feel like shit," she groaned.

He just nodded sympathetically. "I know," he said quietly. "You had far too much."

Hermione closed her eyes again and swallowed as she tried to remember. The last thing she could recall was...

"Astoria?" she croaked, forcing her eyes open again.

“We got her,” said Harry’s voice. Hermione turned her head toward him as her stomach rolled.

“Tell me. I’m awake, just... need to be still.”

Hermione kept her eyes closed as she listened to Harry’s report.

“I took her in last night and questioned her extensively under veritaserum. Your poisoning just before the Easter holidays was something of an accident. She had brewed a diluted version of amortentia for Malfoy. She had been working on perfecting it all term because she knew if it was too strong it would be suspicious, and he would probably detect it. She offered her elf to help with the party due to its size, and he spiked Malfoy’s drink with her version of it under her orders. As for the poison she gave to you, she intentionally brewed amortentia incorrectly in class on Valentine’s Day, but the toxicity of it was stronger than she realized. She didn’t want to kill you – she only wanted to harm you enough that you would be in the hospital wing for a time. She planned to swoop in and comfort Malfoy while you were recovering and use the mild amortentia to shift his interest from you to her while she was doing it. Of course she way overdid it and nearly killed you, and that’s why she panicked and ran.

She showed up yesterday because she was nearly out of gold and decided to steal some from Malfoy to tide her over. While she was here she also planned to shag him in an effort to get pregnant. She got it into her head that if she went back to him in a month or two with a confirmed pregnancy then Malfoy would pull some strings to keep her out of prison and might even marry her, but she obviously needed both gold and him to make that plan work. She snuck onto the grounds a couple nights ago and saw you two eating dinner on the balcony, so she knew which room was yours. She broke into the broom shed and flew up to find you once she saw Malfoy leave for the quidditch final. She stunned you and drugged you with dreamless sleep to keep you out of the way and then polyjuiced herself into you. Thankfully everyone was tied up at the quidditch final for most of the day so she never caught Malfoy alone, but he still noticed something off about her and stunned her just as the dueling club was starting. She had quite a bit of his gold on her as well as a lust potion for him, but thankfully her overall plan was... unsuccessful.”

“Good...” muttered Hermione. “That’s good. Where has she been staying?”

“In a vacant apartment in muggle London of all places. She confunded the landlord so he wouldn’t let it to anybody else, and she’s been confunding muggles for food and such while she lives there. As for the polyjuice and lust potions she brewed them herself. She had most of the ingredients she needed from the student store rooms, and she visited an apothecary in Knockturn Alley for the rest of them right after she pulled some gold out of her parents vault the night of your poisoning. She’s been brewing everything in the apartment, and that’s how she’s been getting around undetected for the last month. Her polyjuice stores were almost out though, so she needed gold to get more.”

“Merlin,” muttered Hermione. “She was desperate.”

“Yes, we have quite a few things we can charge her with. She’ll be going away for five to ten years, I’d say.”

“Hmmmm,” said Hermione. After hearing the whole story she felt a bit sorry for Astoria.

“Don’t even think about it,” said Draco’s voice firmly. “Potter’s charging her.”

“He’s right. I am,” said Harry in a tone that brokered no argument.

Hermione sighed. She knew she wouldn’t talk either one of them out of it.

“Fine,” she muttered. “At least it’s over.”

There was silence for a moment and then she asked, “And the news? It’s the first Sunday of the month.”

“Darling, now is really not the time. You need to rest...” started Draco.

She wrenched an eye open. “If you want me to rest then I suggest you open the bloody *New York Times* and get my crossword out. You can read it to me, and I’ll tell you the answers. It will be very restful. I can do it with my eyes closed.”

He gave her a marvelous eye roll at that, but she just glared at him, and he sighed.

“Fine. Hold on.”

She sat back in bed and closed her eyes as she heard a rustling. “Okay how do we do this?”

“Pick a line with just a few blanks first. It’s one letter per block. Read that clue out loud. Then we build it out from there.”

Malfoy was silent for a moment. “OK, 99-Across, three letters, and the clue is ‘sticky stuff.’”

“GOO,” said Hermione after a moment of thought.

“Huh,” said Draco. “Are you sure about that?”

“Well what do you think it is?”

“I was going to say ‘CUM.’”

“Oh *honestly!*” she said as Harry and Draco both roared with laughter.

Hermione knew she felt like death warmed over, but she couldn’t help it. She chuckled too.

Hermione’s stint in the hospital wing lasted a full week, much to her dismay. Draco, Minerva, Poppy, and even Harry had all insisted she stay there to make sure she didn’t relapse.

Before that incident she had only ever told Harry about the extent of her usage of dreamless sleep right after the war, though she suspected Minerva and Draco had both guessed. But Poppy had no idea, and she was forced to have an uncomfortable conversation with her about it once she finally came around.

Her issues hadn't been as severe as Draco's. She had seen the warning signs and had gotten herself off of it before it had turned really dire. But because of her history with it and the fact that Astoria had given her so much, they had joined forces and kept her under Poppy's nose for observation.

This meant that Draco's birthday passed while Hermione was in the hospital wing, and Hermione was a bit put out by it. Not that she had had any brilliant ideas for gifts, but she had rather hoped they would take a break from the end-of-year madness to have a really great shag. Perhaps he would give *himself* a nice birthday gift that way.

Draco, however, had absolutely put his foot down about it and refused to even consider such a thing until her observation period was over. So the best Hermione could do was give him a rain check and loan him her latest copy of *Cosmopolitan UK* which had an article titled "HIS PLEASURE!" She told him to read it and tell her what he wanted once she was finally allowed out.

The problem, of course, was that once she *was* finally allowed out exams were upon them, and both she and Draco were so exhausted they turned more to sleep than to shagging. Minerva and Horace made Hermione and Draco administer the finals alone, as a bit of a final exam for them too. And while Hermione watched her students march through the practicals with pride or dismay, the whole thing took far more time than she had ever realized.

Once the practicals were done, she stared at her stack of over three hundred written exams she had to grade and just sighed. This was going to take forever.

"Princess, I'm going to need at least one good shag before you're off to Potter's. You had better hurry up," said Draco.

"Minerva's exams are twice as long as Horace's," she grumbled, as she watched her boyfriend playing with the school snitch on her sofa. "You did yours while waiting for students to brew their practicals. You know I couldn't grade during mine."

"Well next year make the exam shorter then. But I'm serious, darling. If you're really going to be away from me for two weeks while you're at Potter's, then I need something to hold me over."

"I'm sure I'll see you a few times while I'm there," she said.

He just scowled at her. "First of all, I'm going to be away for at least the first week myself. Second, if this wedding is really as fancy as you say it's going to be, then I doubt it. They're going to need you."

She shrugged. "Ginny was inspired by your mum's party. What can I say?"

She caught a swift smile on his face. “Fine. And I suppose she needs to make a splash given what the papers are printing.”

Hermione nodded in acknowledgment. Sure enough, the wedding invitations had gone out the week before, and a member of the press had overheard some aurors talking about it in a bar shortly thereafter. Just as Hermione had predicted, the news had been leaked, and it caused a firestorm of speculation. Quite a bit of it was unkind about Ginny in particular. Ginny had taken it as a personal challenge and decided to make the wedding so exceptional that any rumors about it being fast or last-minute would be quelled.

The problem, of course, was that the wedding was going to be in the gardens behind Grimmauld Place with the reception in the ballroom in order to keep the media out. While Harry had disclosed the location of Grimmauld Place to every wedding guest in the invitations, he wasn’t keen on telling too many vendors or other people they didn’t know and trust. He had made an exception for the band and a bartender, but that was all. So instead of hiring chair rental companies and florists, Ginny had recruited Hermione to be her personal transfiguration master and conjure nearly everything she wanted.

As the maid of honor — and in fact, the only bridesmaid at all — Hermione took her duties seriously. She had agreed with this plan and was rather looking forward to the challenge. But it was still a bit daunting, and she was sure it would exhaust her.

“You’re *sure* I can’t sleep over?” moaned Draco, not for the first time.

Hermione sighed. “I told you, Mrs. Weasley is going to be staying there too. It’s not like she’s completely oblivious about us, but she doesn’t approve of shacking up before marriage. An engagement is a bare minimum for her. I don’t think I can stand to spend two weeks with her and watch her silent judgment if she sees either one of us doing the walk of shame.”

Her face reddened as she said this last bit, and she refused to look at him.

“Surely you’re going to tell her I’m whisking you away again as soon as the wedding is over?”

Now Hermione *did* look at him. “It probably won’t come up before we’re gone. She was in a right state before Bill and George’s weddings, and this is the biggest one for her. It’s her only daughter, and Harry has always been the runaway favorite of all of her non-children. I’m a pretty distant second.”

She heard Draco snort at this.

“Fine. Grade quickly then darling. I intend to collect on that rain check.”

Chapter 25: Negotiations

Draco

“Alright mate, it’s time for you to spill. You’ve been avoiding talking about her, and we are abandoning all subtlety. Here, drink this up and then tell us everything.”

Draco was reluctantly amused as Theo shoved a stiff drink in his hand.

With Granger gone to Grimmauld Place for two weeks, Draco had resolved to visit Theo and Blaise at Blaise’s family home in Spoleto. It was a small town in Umbria, surrounded by vineyards, and Blaise’s home was built to have spectacular views of the countryside. Draco had always loved it here. It was remote and private, but thanks to the fact that all three of them were wizards, apparating between Spoleto and more urban wizarding areas took no time at all.

Draco had been here for three days now and missed Hermione desperately. He had told himself that this little getaway made sense. She had a flurry of maid of honor duties for the two weeks leading up to Potter’s wedding, and Draco had owed his friends this visit. It would be *fine*, he told himself. Surely they could be apart for a couple weeks.

But Draco was not fine, not at all. He hadn’t spent a single night away from her since New Year’s Eve, and his first night at Blaise’s house resulted in the worst nightmares he had had in months. He had resorted to taking his dream potion every night while he was here.

He had deflected most of his friends’ questions about her because he was sure they would just give him hell for it. The only things he had really discussed with them were her views on the media and a reassurance that his fortune and title were not the reasons she wanted him. He had largely avoided everything else. But as he looked at Theo’s determined face and turned to see Blaise with an identical look as well, Draco knew he couldn’t deflect anymore.

Besides, he thought. *They’re not idiots. They can tell something’s wrong.*

“Fine,” he said. “What do you want to know?”

He saw them exchange a glance with one another.

“How serious is it?” asked Blaise finally.

“Very,” said Draco shortly. “I might be... making plans... for things.”

Both of their eyes widened a bit. “We read about it in the papers after Easter of course,” said Theo slowly. “You know we get *The Daily Prophet* here to keep up with what’s going on in England. But you haven’t announced anything since then, so we weren’t sure if you were lying to that reporter.”

Draco shook his head. "I wasn't. But school's been busy with year end things, and some of my ideas and plans... well it's taken time for everything to come together."

They nodded slowly. "When did it start then? Was it really New Year's Eve or before?"

Draco sighed. "Officially, on New Year's Eve, but we had been dancing around each other for a bit before then. I actually saw her in... a state of undress the first night at Hogwarts, and..."

Now both of his friends were smirking at him.

"Don't," he said firmly.

"It's hard not to," said Theo, whose eyes were dancing now. "Seeing as how it's you. And her."

Draco just gave him a stony look.

"Alright *fine*," said Theo, giving him a long-suffering sigh. "I won't give you hell for it on one condition."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "And what's that?"

"I get to be the godfather of your first kidlet."

"Hey!" said Blaise. "I was going to claim godfather!"

"We can both be godfathers," said Theo reasonably. "We can call one of us godfather and the other goddad or whatever the fuck we want. But it's the same difference. We'll be godparents."

Draco felt a smile tug at his lips. "Hermione might have something to say about that."

"Bring her around to meet us, and we will make her see reason," said Blaise. "And in any event, if you don't agree to this then not only will we take the piss out of you for the rest of your marriage with her, I'll tell her about those times you spied on her in the Prefects' bath."

Draco's eyes widened. "You wouldn't..." he started. "And I never....! You know I never saw...!"

They were both giving him their best smirks now.

Draco huffed. The incidents in the Prefects' bath had happened quite by accident of course, or at least the first one had. The other two times may have been somewhat strategic on his part, but he didn't *see* anything. Not really. And he had never meant to confess it to his two best mates. It was one of those things they had coaxed out of him when he was very drunk one night.

Goddammit they have me by the balls.

He glared at them, but they did not back down. This was classic Slytherin behavior of course. They had been hanging onto this one for a few years, just waiting for the perfect moment to use it against him.

Well he was a Slytherin too. He could play their games.

“Let me tell you what I’m willing to do.”

Now they narrowed their eyes and waited. They recognized the opening to a negotiation as well as any other member of their House.

“I will offer you my full and total support in joint godfathering roles for my first child, and I will attempt to persuade Hermione to agree to it using all resources available to me. In exchange, you do not give either one of us hell about the other. You do not tell her about those... incidents in the Prefects’ bath. And you agree to help me with some critical parts of my proposal that are proving to be a bit more complicated than I originally anticipated.”

He saw them look at each other as though weighing this.

“And what are our damages if you can’t convince her?” asked Theo. “I assume you won’t be talking to her about it until after you’ve proposed, so that last point of yours is a freebie you’ll be getting from us regardless.”

Damn.

Theo always was far too strategic for his own good. He had seen through Draco right away.

Draco gritted his teeth, weighing his options now.

“Damages I’ll offer... you can each pick a bottle of anything you want from the Malfoy cellars. Anything at all.”

They looked at each other again. Draco couldn’t read the look that passed between them.

“And?” Blaise finally said. “What else?”

Goddammit.

Draco sighed. He knew there was only one thing they would take. And really, out of all the things they had threatened him with it was the decades of teasing he was really trying to avoid.

“Fine. And you can also tell her about the Prefects’ bath if she doesn’t agree.”

He saw the ghosts of smiles cross both of their faces at exactly the same time.

“I want to know one thing before we accept,” said Theo. “Give us one example of when you have been... highly persuasive with her. Because what we really want is the joint godfathering, and she has always struck me as very strong-willed. I want to know if you really think you can convince her to give it to us instead of Potter.”

Now Draco leaned back as he surveyed them, wondering if he should tell them this.

What the hell, they're probably going to get it out of me at some point anyway.

"Fine," he said. "During Easter I took her on a yacht for a week, and she spent six days wearing no clothes for me because that's what I wanted her to do. At most it was bits of lingerie here and there, but she was naked most of the time. And she's the Transfiguration Professor at Hogwarts. She could have conjured clothes for herself at any time if she wasn't willing to cooperate."

Both of his friends sat back and looked rather impressed by this. They exchanged one more look with each other.

"Alright then," said Blaise, now turning back to Draco. "We accept your terms."

Draco breathed a sigh of relief as they shook on it.

"Now tell us," said Theo. "Since we have promised not to bust your balls for it... How's the sex?"

"Explosive," said Draco instantly, and they both grinned at this.

"Let me guess," said Blaise. "She's all fiery in bed. She goes all Gryffindor Golden Girl who saved the world and takes control."

Draco smiled a little at this. "No, actually, she's..." he trailed off as he hesitated. He refused to give them explicit details. But they both read the truth on his face. They knew enough about Draco's preferences to know what he wasn't saying.

"No!" said Theo, his eyes widening. "She's submissive? Seriously? She's Hermione Granger!"

Draco couldn't help it as a broad grin split his face. "In public she dominates. That's true. And it's really fucking hot. But in bed, she's just..." he trailed off a bit dreamily.

Both of them were still looking at him in disbelief. Then Theo's face transformed into a look of delight. "I'll have to exchange tips with her!"

Draco's eyes widened in horror. "Theo, don't you *dare*. Not until she's met you a few times at any rate."

Theo gave him a cheeky grin. "But I'm a sub too. You know that."

Draco did know that. He had walked in on Blaise dominating Theo any number of times during eighth year. Neither of them were particularly shy about it once they came out publicly. They had kept their relationship under wraps during the war out of fear that Theo's father might retaliate, but once he was imprisoned they felt free to let the world know. And those who lived in the same dorm as them at Hogwarts truly got an eyeful.

“I do know that, but it’s still all a bit new for her. And she doesn’t know you at all. Spare her for at least a few visits, yes? Let her get used to you first.”

Theo rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll give you three visits before I talk to her about it. Although...” and now his eyes got wide again as he just realized something. “*That’s* how you got her to spend six days naked with you isn’t it? Because you’re her dom.”

Draco just rubbed the bridge of his nose and prayed for patience. He heard Blaise chuckling.

“It’s a great idea, Draco,” said Blaise. “I find myself very inspired.”

Draco rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help a small smile cross his face. “Do I need to leave you two alone then?”

“Later,” said Theo airily. “But I must say, I agree. It’s a fantastic idea. I’m very into it. And now I’m far more optimistic about actually getting that godfather title.”

Draco snorted at this.

“Well I say good on you mate,” said Blaise. “You fell in love with somebody who challenges you intellectually, doesn’t care about your fame and money, and is compatible with you in bed. That’s the trifecta right there.”

“Yes,” said Draco simply. “She’s perfect for me.”

“And you miss her,” said Theo, studying him closely now. “That’s why you’ve been a morose bastard ever since you arrived.”

Draco sighed and put his head in his hands. “I’m sorry. Yes. I just... fuck I haven’t been away from her since Christmas and that was before...”

He looked up to find them both smiling at him slightly.

“We forgive you,” said Blaise magnanimously. “Now why don’t you tell us what you need us to do for this proposal of yours. Let’s work out the plan, and then you can go back to her. Just make sure you bring her with you next time.”

Draco exhaled as a broad smile split his face. “Excellent. Thank you. Alright, so I need to go away for a couple days to arrange something. But while I’m gone, this is what I need you to do...”

Hermione

Dear Hermione,

You've been away from me for nine days, mon coeur, and that's nine days too long. I hardly know what to do with myself, and even my trip to see Theo and Blaise didn't distract me like I thought it would. It was bad enough that they staged an intervention and called me a "morose bastard." I'm back in England now, and I've been distracting myself with piano and potions, but it's not working. And you should also know that my sleep has gone to shit now that we're sleeping apart.

I know I said I would leave you alone, but I can't do it anymore. I'm inviting myself over to Grimmauld Place for lunch today because I need to see you. Tell Potter and Ginny I'll even offer the decorating services of my mother in exchange for an hour of your time.

With all seriousness though, you know this sort of thing is her forte. She would love to help if there is anything you all need.

Speaking of love, I love you darling. I'll be there at noon, unless you tell me I can come earlier. Potter needs to ward me out if he intends to keep me away.

Love, DLM

Hermione smiled to herself as she read the note. He had promised to stay out of her hair while she was at Grimmauld Place, and he had even planned a trip to see his friends while she was tied up. Up until that morning he had kept his promise to stay away. This was the first she had heard from him since they left Hogwarts, but she was secretly thrilled he wrote to tell her he couldn't do it anymore. The truth was, she had been going mad without him too. This was the longest they had been apart since the Christmas holidays and so much had happened since then it felt like a different time. Still, at least she had plenty to do at Grimmauld Place to fill the time. It sounded like Draco had not had a very good trip to Italy, and now he was truly bored out of his mind as he counted down the days to the wedding.

"Hey Gin," she said. Ginny looked up from her coffee with a strained expression. "Draco says Narcissa will help with the decorating if you want."

Ginny's eyes got huge, and she bit her lip. "Do you think so? Really? Because I have all these ideas, but translating them into actual *decorations*..."

Hermione nodded. It was true. Ginny had been scouring wedding magazines for months and had put together a whole book of things she liked. But now that it was time to actually *decorate*, she had become uncharacteristically indecisive. Ginny, Hermione, and Mrs. Weasley had completed most of their last-minute tasks in selecting music for the band, finalizing the menu for Kreacher, and working on final alterations to each of their dresses the first week Hermione had been at Grimmauld Place. But they had come to a complete halt for the last couple of days while Ginny dithered about decorations. The only things Hermione had conjured so far were the plates, wine glasses, and flatware. They hadn't made any additional progress, and Hermione rather felt that time was slipping away from them.

"Yes, I'm sure she would love to help. We have all the big things sorted already, but the ballroom and gardens need to look really nice, and we've gotten stuck. You know she's fantastic at this sort of thing."

“Who is fantastic at what?” asked Mrs. Weasley as she bustled into the kitchen.

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a look.

“Narcissa Malfoy is fantastic at decorating for parties,” said Hermione. “Draco wrote to me and says he wants to come over for lunch. He also said Narcissa would be happy to help us.”

Mrs. Weasley looked anxious about this, and Hermione was sure she knew why.

“Mrs. Weasley, I really don’t think it’s a problem,” she said quietly. “Bellatrix died four years ago, and based on what Draco has said I think it was a bit of a relief to all of them. They knew how dangerous she was.”

Mrs. Weasley exhaled. “Very well. I won’t deny that we could use some guidance with this. Merlin knows I can arrange a backyard wedding in the Burrow with my eyes closed, but this...” she made a hopeless gesture.

“It’s different,” said Hermione gently. “Ginny should have what she wants, and she needs the pictures to be absolutely perfect so the press stops printing such nasty things once they are released. But we’re all a bit out of our depth here. Narcissa throws a party that makes it into the papers every single year. She can tell us what to do, I’m certain of it.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded, and Ginny said, “Tell them both to come over then. And tell Draco to bring his broom. Harry is driving me mad. I should never have told him to take time off before the wedding. Maybe Draco can distract him for us.”

Hermione chuckled and flipped the paper over before summoning a pen.

Dear Draco,

Ginny says you’re welcome to come over at any time, and we would all love Narcissa’s help if she’s willing. The major decisions (menu, music, cake, etc.) have been made of course, but we’re all completely baffled about what we should do to the gardens and ballroom, and we only have five days left, including today. We need guidance, desperately. Narcissa was invited to the wedding so she should be able to get through the fidelius charm, but let me know if she has any trouble.

Bring your broom as well. Harry took the week before the wedding off to help. He’s only been here for two days, and he’s driving us mad with his hovering and his advanced state of nerves. We need you to take him flying to distract him for us, as all the Weasley brothers are at work this week.

Please rescue us from Harry as soon as possible, and I promise to pull you into the library for a hot snog right after lunch.

I love and miss you too.

Love, Hermione

Hermione sent the note back with Draco's eagle owl, and within an hour Kreacher had come to the ballroom to announce the arrival of Master Draco Malfoy and Lady Narcissa Malfoy with misty eyes. Hermione could tell he was thrilled that they were both there.

"Darling," said Draco, striding toward Hermione and pulling her in for an enthusiastic kiss. Mrs. Weasley, Narcissa, and Ginny watched in amusement as Hermione melted for him.

"Hi," she said a bit breathlessly when they broke apart.

"Hi," he said, smiling down at her broadly.

Hermione saw he was wearing his quidditch outfit and carrying his broom, and she gave him an appreciative once over. He always looked so sexy dressed this way. Draco practically preened as he watched her check him out.

"Right then," said Ginny, interrupting the moment. "Draco, I've already kicked Harry out because he's making me go spare. He should be in the sitting room. If you could distract him for me, I would be very grateful."

Draco gave her a small salute and with one last kiss for Hermione he turned and left the ballroom.

There was a slightly awkward pause, before Narcissa jumped right in, "Alright. Decorations. Hermione dear, I understand you're the only bridesmaid, yes?"

Hermione nodded.

"Excellent," said Narcissa. "Then please go fetch your dress so I can see exactly what color we're working with. We'll go from there."

Hermione was a bit bemused by this, but she nodded and ran upstairs to get her dress before hurrying back. To her relief, the initial tension seemed to have dispersed as Narcissa was studying Ginny's ideabook with interest.

Hermione unzipped the bag with her dress and pulled it out so Narcissa could see.

"Green!" Narcissa said with some surprise, but Hermione sensed she was pleased.

Ginny nodded. "Yes, there's so much green in Grimmauld Place we thought it best. And it should coordinate with any flowers and such too. But of course I can't make up my mind..."

Narcissa nodded as she studied the dress, and her face assumed a curious expression that Hermione couldn't quite pinpoint.

"Very well. I think we should play up the green and the white from your dress of course. I suggest silver and gold accents because they're all over the ballroom. And then pops of purple and yellow in the flowers as secondary colors."

"Purple and yellow?" asked Ginny curiously.

Narcissa nodded. "It will be lovely with that shade of green and white. And you won't need much of the purple at all."

Ginny exhaled, and suddenly smiled broadly. "Excellent. Decision made then. Let's get started."

Hermione groaned as she fell backwards onto her bed, still dressed. She was utterly exhausted. Once Narcissa guided Ginny toward a certain look, it became Hermione's job to begin conjuring. It was a good thing they had started this five days early, because she was having to take periodic breaks due to magical depletion. Today she had conjured twenty tables with eight chairs each, and drapes for the walls. She was absolutely spent.

The best part of the day by far had been lunch. Draco and Harry swept in after spending a couple hours flying and playing seeker against each other. According to the boys, the final tally was Harry – three catches and Draco – seven catches. Harry was contemplating finally replacing his Firebolt.

"I'll always keep mine because Sirius gave it to me. But I can't deny that Malfoy's is faster, even if he's a pompous git about it. And now I owe him two hundred galleons."

Kreacher had set out lunch for all of them, and once they had eaten Hermione pulled Draco toward the hallway that led to the library. They hadn't even made it through the doors before Draco had pushed her against the wall and was snogging the daylights out of her.

"I've missed you so damn much," he gasped between kisses. "I never want to be away from you this long again."

Hermione grabbed his hand and pulled him through the doors, which he sealed and silenced behind him before pushing her against a bookshelf.

"I've always wanted to fuck you in a library," he said, as he yanked her pants and knickers down and lifted her leg. It was fast and hot, and after nine days apart neither of them took very long to come. But Merlin if it wasn't exactly what she needed to survive the afternoon.

After lunch, Draco and Harry stuck around the ballroom to watch Hermione's conjuring, and Harry offered to help. Unfortunately, the shade of gold he made the chairs didn't meet Narcissa's exacting specifications, so he was relegated to observation. It was all up to Hermione.

After her second break for magical depletion, Draco quietly excused himself and returned fifteen minutes later with one of his potions.

"Drink," he said. "It's a strengthening solution. You need it."

The potion did the trick, or mostly at any rate. It certainly gave Hermione enough energy to finish the things she had to conjure today to stay on schedule, though she was still wiped out by the end of it. After a late dinner and a promise that they would return first thing in the morning, Draco and Narcissa left for the Manor while Hermione and the others turned in for bed.

Hermione was now thinking through her to-do list and wondering how much of Draco's potion she was going to need to get through it all.

Wednesday: Conjure the stage, music stands, and chairs for the band.

Thursday: Conjure table linens, napkins, and the hundreds of candles Narcissa wants to line the ballroom.

Friday: Conjure chairs for the ceremony, an aisle for Ginny to walk down, and the trellis at the front that Ginny wants.

Saturday morning: Wake up early and conjure all of the bloody flowers while Narcissa and the elves arrange them.

Merlin, but she had a lot to do. She *really* wished they had started this several days ago, but there was nothing to be done at this point.

Suddenly Hermione heard an odd sound, like her door opening and closing, and she sat up in confusion. Her room appeared to be empty, but she sensed a presence. She started to reach for her wand under her pillow when Draco materialized, pulling off Harry's invisibility cloak.

"What the...?" she asked, and he just grinned.

"Potter and I may have had a discussion this morning about the best ways to avoid walks of shame in front of Mrs. Weasley. He's granted me custody of the cloak for the rest of this week."

Hermione smiled broadly at this.

"So you're staying with me tonight, I take it?"

"Naturally," he said. "I told you, my sleep has gone to shit. I can't do it anymore."

Hermione sighed in contentment as she flumped back on the bed. "I'm beat."

"Mmmm," he said, as he got undressed and sat on the bed next to her. "Then let me take care of you, darling."

Hermione gave him a skeptical look, but he was already running a finger down the V of her T-shirt, and she couldn't help but feel some heat pool in her stomach.

“I have no energy,” she said.

“All you have to do is come,” he said. “Do you think you have energy for that?”

Hermione didn’t say anything to this, but for once he didn’t press her to use her words. He read the answer in her eyes, as he moved his hand down to her stomach and then under her shirt.

“First thing’s first...” he said, as he stood and turned toward her. “You’re overdressed.”

To Hermione’s amusement he took her shoes off and then peeled her pants off of her legs. He didn’t even ask her to raise her arms for him, but just used a severing charm on her shirt.

“I’ll buy you another one,” he said at her scandalized look, before contemplating her bra and knickers.

“I like the lace,” he said, as Hermione blushed a little.

“I may have changed when I heard you were coming over,” she admitted.

He gave her a broad smile at this, but didn’t say anything more as he lifted her up higher on the bed and then flipped her over on her stomach.

“What are you...?” she started, but he cut her off.

“Shhh. You’re tense.”

To Hermione’s surprise she felt him straddle her bum and then gently unhook her bra. He gave her back a light brush with his hand before pulling them away for a moment and then bearing down hard.

“Errrugh...” came the inelegant sound that was wrenched from Hermione’s throat. She felt pressure and *release*.

“You have so many knots...” murmured Draco. “Hang on.”

She heard him mutter a summoning charm, and a moment later she felt something else smooth on her skin that began to penetrate her tense muscles. It tingled just a bit before releasing a delicious warmth deep into her muscles and slowly forcing them to relax.

“What is that?” she breathed.

“Little experiment of mine,” he said. “Special massage oil I developed. Like it?”

“Mmmm,” she said, as her eyes fluttered shut.

This was delicious. This was wonderful. This was...

“Somebody’s getting turned on,” said Draco.

Ah yes, that too.

She thought it was rather rich of him to call her out on it because she could clearly feel his erection pressing into her bum. But Hermione was feeling too relaxed to point this out to him.

Draco spent a considerable time rubbing his special oil into her shoulders and down her back before hooking his fingers through the waistband of her knickers and pulling them down.

Now mostly naked she felt him brush her bum before he started massaging her legs.

God this is amazing, thought Hermione as he started with her hamstrings, then moved down to her calves. Nobody had *ever* massaged her legs before, and she didn't even realize how much tension she was holding there. And then finally he moved down to her feet, and Hermione groaned out loud. She had been on her feet *all day*, and they were so very sore.

As his ministrations finally came to an end, Hermione felt him gently part her legs and then his lips started trailing up her legs again.

Hermione groaned as he approached that special place and he spread her even wider.

"There she is..." he murmured, and Hermione knew he was looking at her. "You know I didn't get my dessert tonight."

Yes please, she thought, and she gasped as she felt his mouth on her. It was different like this. She instinctively arched her back to give him access, but she also knew he must have his face buried in the mattress to access her like that. Not that he seemed to mind. He was eating her like he was starving, and before long Hermione felt herself begin to shake.

To her consternation he didn't let her come, and he pulled away at just the last minute. Now Hermione was feeling both exhausted and frustrated.

"Please Draco..." she whimpered.

She felt Draco turn her to her side, and then he crawled up behind her and spooned her in the same way he often did in the middle of the night. His arm encircled her and fully remove her bra now as his hand palmed her breasts to pull her close to him. His knee nudged her legs open ever so slightly, and then she felt him push into her from behind. They both groaned at the same time.

"Relax mon coeur," he said as he began to move. "All you have to do is come for me. Nice and easy, yes?"

Hermione sighed as she let herself just feel. He was kneading her breasts, and pressing himself deep inside of her, and dropping lazy kisses on her neck while he did it. They didn't often do it like this, so slow and sweet. It made Hermione's heart swell as those telltale signs of her orgasm approached.

"You're so close, beautiful," he whispered. "You can fall. I'll catch you."

Something about his words went straight inside of her, and Hermione crested as she cried out. Not a moment later she felt his release too, as she slumped into the mattress, completely

spent.

Draco slipped out of her and muttered a spell to clean her up, but he didn't let go of her for a moment.

"I love you," he murmured.

"I love you too," she whispered.

And before they knew it, they both fell asleep, finally content for the first time since the end of the school year.

Chapter 26: Wedding of the Year

Hermione

In a truly surprising turn of events, the Malfoys became the MVPs of The Wedding of the Year.

Narcissa was critical in her role as chief advisor about all things decor. While she always ran her ideas past Ginny and Mrs. Weasley first, there was no question she had taken control with a firm hand. The others deferred to her, much to Hermione's relief, and over the course of the next several days decisions were made without the second guessing or dithering that had plagued the first nine days of work. Narcissa quickly developed The Vision, and as they worked together the ballroom and gardens transformed into something truly extraordinary.

Working with Narcissa was also an educational experience for Hermione. She knew, or rather hoped, that Narcissa would be in her life for decades to come. The Wedding of the Year and The Vision gave Hermione a lot of insight about how her hopefully-future-mother-in-law behaved, her strengths and weaknesses, and the things that made her tick.

Draco, of course, had spent months complaining about his mother to her. She knew he loved Narcissa dearly. That much was evident. But she also knew that Narcissa drove Draco mad. As Hermione dove into the work with Narcissa she had expected to find a woman who was flighty and shallow, whose singular talent was hosting parties and soirees. Instead, she discovered that Narcissa could be formidable when she wanted something. She was socially strategic and could spot pinch points about things like table assignments and room circulation.

"No dear, I think it's best to seat the Shackletons away from Robertses. I know Kingsley appointed Carlin Roberts as the head of the auror department after the war, but it was really due to necessity and lack of any other qualified options at the time. Those two have always had an enormous rivalry with each other, and I expect Kingsley will appoint somebody else to the position as soon as he can."

Narcissa was filled to the brim with these kinds of insights, and Hermione eventually concluded that Draco had been a bit unfair about her. She wasn't flighty or vapid at all. She was shrewd. She was smart. And Hermione finally, *finally* understood why Draco had fled to Hogwarts. Narcissa was absolutely relentless as she brought The Vision to fruition, and Draco had been at odds with her about his future when he left the Manor. His vision had not matched hers at the time.

Hermione was relieved to find that Narcissa truly seemed to like her, and Hermione liked Narcissa too. They were very different, certainly, but they developed a mutual respect for one another in pursuit of The Vision for The Wedding of the Year. Narcissa was impressed by Hermione's transfiguration skills, and Hermione was impressed by Narcissa's ability to guide Ginny and Mrs. Weasley without offense.

Hermione thought she could probably learn a lot from Narcissa Malfoy.

Then there was Draco. For some inexplicable reason he seemed perfectly willing to spend each morning distracting Harry with flying while the witches worked. And then, just like the first day, they would all come together for lunch before the wizards watched them work in the afternoons.

In fact, Draco and Harry almost seemed to like each other, though they also insulted each other quite a bit, especially in the immediate aftermath of their quidditch matchups.

“Look dickhead, you clobbered me on that last catch. You and I both know it wasn’t clean.”

“It’s not my fault your ferret face hit my elbow, you prick. I won fair and square.”

None of the witches fully understood the developing relationship between Draco and Harry, but it kept Harry occupied so they didn’t question it.

Or rather, they didn’t question it in front of each other. Hermione certainly *did* question Draco about it once they were alone at night, because Draco continued to use the invisibility cloak to sleep with her.

“You’re becoming friends with Harry aren’t you?” she asked him on the third night.

“Absolutely not,” insisted Draco. “I am distracting Potter because Mother has made it clear that he is my burden to bear in exchange for spending time with you. I have to do it until The Vision has been fully executed and The Wedding of the Year has finally taken place. If I don’t play nice, I don’t get to see you.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Bullshit. You like him. And he likes you. He’s letting you use the cloak.”

Draco scoffed. “It’s not bullshit. And he’s only letting me use the cloak because he knows *you* want me to stay here at night. Besides, I blackmailed him a little bit so he would come up with a solution for our walk of shame problem.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “And how did you blackmail him, pray tell?”

“Can’t tell you that, love. It would be unsporting. He held up his end of the deal, so I have to hold up mine.”

Hermione just stared now. “You can’t *possibly* have something on Harry that I don’t already know.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong,” he said lightly. “I have a few things on Potter now, as it happens, especially since you ladies have been making me babysit him for the last three days.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Hermione.

“It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement,” said Draco airily. “He has something I want, and I have something he wants. I was pleased to learn he has enough Slytherin in him to understand that sort of thing. The precise details of our arrangement, however, are confidential.”

Hermione just rolled her eyes, but she didn’t have the energy to press him further. She had conjured nearly five hundred large candles and suspended them around the ballroom today. She was beat.

“One day I’ll make you tell me,” she muttered.

He gave her a suggestive smile. “I can’t *wait* to see what you’ll do to convince me darling.”

“Not tonight though. I’m dead on my feet.”

“On your stomach then,” he said. “A massage is in order.”

This was music to Hermione’s ears. After that first night he had given her one the previous evening too. Now here they were again.

I could get used to this, she thought with a sigh as she felt his hands sink her back.

Soon she felt him rubbing his oil into her shoulders as well, and she groaned.

“You are far too good at that, you know,” she muttered. “It’s quite unfair.”

“What’s so unfair?” he asked in amusement. “You’re getting rubbed down, and all I’m getting is an erection.”

She snorted. If he didn’t understand the gross inequities here, she certainly wasn’t going to tell him. She liked his massages so much she would give him nearly anything to make sure he didn’t stop. It wasn’t her fault that he evidently hadn’t figured that out yet.

He rubbed for a few more minutes, and Hermione’s eyes closed as she felt herself relaxing into the wonderful warmth of the oil and strength of his hands.

“Hermione,” he said slowly. “I was hoping you would do something for me.”

Hermione’s eyes flew open.

Shit. He’s figured it out.

“Hmmm?” she said, trying to sound casual.

Draco’s ministrations stopped, though he didn’t remove his hands from her back. Hermione tried not to whimper.

“Mother says your dress is green,” he said.

“It is...” said Hermione in confusion, wishing he would just ask her what he wanted already so he would go back to the massage.

“I want you to wear our emeralds to the wedding,” he said.

Now Hermione lifted up a bit so she could turn her head to look at him, and he was staring back at her with a determined expression on his face.

“Your emeralds?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Mother saw your dress and said they would be perfect. They’ll... make a strong statement. I want you to make it.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Is this one of those pureblood things again?” she asked.

To her consternation he gave her one good rub, and Hermione groaned before he paused his hands again.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“But Ginny...” she protested.

Another rub, and another groan before he stilled again. “Ginny is wearing the Potter diamonds. Mother talked to her about it while you were conjuring all those bloody candles today. Ginny wanted Mother to see the dress and everything that would go along with it.”

Hermione frowned. She knew Narcissa and Ginny had disappeared together today, but she had been so focused on her candles she hadn’t asked them about it.

“But for me to wear something similar...” she started.

“Ginny says it’s fine,” cut in Draco. “She really liked the idea. You’re the only bridesmaid, so it’s not like you have to match anybody else. Besides, Mother went to Muriel’s right after dinner and strong-armed her into letting Ginny borrow the tiara. You won’t show her up or anything like that. You’ll just be making a statement.”

Hermione hesitated, and he started rubbing again. “Come on love...” he said in his most coaxing voice. “Say you’ll wear them.”

Hermione sighed as her eyes fluttered closed again. “Alright,” she finally said. “Provided Ginny says it’s okay. I want to hear it from her first. I’ll ask her tomorrow.”

Draco rewarded her with an extra deep rub. “Good girl.”

Hermione melted.

Draco

Draco had acknowledged and accepted many uncomfortable truths over the past year. But when Hermione suggested he was actually becoming *friends* with Potter, he scoffed. There was nothing uncomfortable to acknowledge and accept, because it was most certainly not the truth.

Sure, Draco and Potter had settled into a sort of mutual tolerance earlier in the year, but that was entirely for Hermione's sake. Draco knew he had to be able to rub shoulders with Potter to some degree if he was going to keep Hermione in his life. It was easier to just go along with it. But other than their propensity for bets, Draco and Potter didn't socialize very much. They mostly steered clear from each other at the dueling club.

It was true that Hermione's poisoning and the subsequent events had wrought some odd changes, but those were exceptional circumstances. The things he and Potter had talked about had never been repeated. Even when they had talked about proposals, that had been nothing more than reconnaissance on Draco's part. Potter probably told Draco about it because he wanted Hermione to have something nice.

As for their interactions during The Wedding of the Year, Draco and Potter simply had an agreement with each other, spurred by a minor bit of blackmail from Draco. When Potter puked behind the bushes during their first quidditch match up, he tried to swear Draco to secrecy. Draco, however, seized the moment to find a workaround to the walk of shame problem. Soon they had an agreement: Potter would supply Draco with the invisibility cloak, and Draco wouldn't tell the witches that Potter kept running into the bushes or the loo every time his nerves got the better of him.

Sure, Draco might have thrown together a potion for Potter after the second day of this. But it was purely out of self-interest. Draco was tired of vanishing the sick, and he needed the cloak for a short time after the wedding too. So he had extended the terms of their deal: he'd give Potter a potion that helped, and Potter would let him use the cloak for a few weeks after the wedding.

They struck their bargain, and both of them were satisfied with it.

The fact that Draco let Potter try his new Firebolt was simply because the competition wasn't good enough while Potter flew on a subpar broom.

The fact that Potter and Draco had gone to a quidditch supply store together on the fourth day to look at brooms was again out of self-interest. Draco needed to make sure Potter didn't back down when he saw how much the new Firebolts actually cost. Potter needed to buy it or else Draco would continue to wipe the floor with him, and that was really no fun at all.

The fact that Draco had let Potter use the Malfoy ballroom for extra Defense lessons for David Fawley while the Grimmauld Place ballroom was being transformed for The Wedding of the Year had nothing at all to do with Potter. That had all been for David's benefit. David was his student, and Draco was a teacher.

No, Draco and Potter most certainly weren't becoming *friends*. The notion was absolutely ridiculous.

This was further reinforced by the arrival of the Weasley brothers the day before the wedding.

"Draco, you have to promise me you will be on your best behavior," pleaded Hermione during one of her breaks. "You and Ron haven't seen each other at all since..."

Draco rolled his eyes and didn't respond.

"*Promise me*," she pleaded.

Draco cocked his head. "I promise to reflect the same level of courtesy he extends to me."

"Oh bloody hell," groaned Hermione. "This is going to be a disaster."

Draco shrugged. "It was inevitable I'd see him at some point, yes?"

"Well yes, but I *really* hoped it wouldn't be right before a wedding..."

"There's nothing for it, love. We'll just have to make do. Now go find Ginny. Mother has given me my orders. Then I need to see *you* tonight."

She just sighed and went back out into the gardens where she was conjuring chairs for the ceremony. Draco took a deep breath and walked upstairs to Potter's room, where Potter and Weasley were supposed to be doing their final fittings.

Draco sighed as he pushed the door open.

To his consternation, Potter and Weasley were both there, but so were three other Weasley brothers and a bloke Draco didn't recognize. Two of the brothers were older. The third Draco recognized as George Weasley. And the unidentifiable bloke was a sandy blonde, sitting rather close to the stocky Weasley brother and looking at Draco a bit curiously.

"What the hell are you doing here?" scowled Weasley.

Draco ignored him and looked at Potter. "Mother says I'm supposed to help with your fitting."

At this, Kreacher popped out from behind a screen and looked at Draco with something like relief on his face.

"Master Draco, there you are," he said. "We need your eye, sir."

"But..." started Weasley.

"Leave it, Ron," sighed Potter. "Narcissa is trying to execute The Vision."

"What vision?" he asked in confusion.

“You’re better off not knowing,” muttered Potter. Then he sighed again as he looked at Draco. “Alright, Ferret, tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

Draco felt his lip twitch, and he saw a look of delight mixed with utter confusion cross Weasley’s face.

“Go put on your tuxes. You and the Weasel both. I’ll wait.”

Weasley looked a bit mutinous at this, but Potter just grabbed him and pulled him into an attached bathroom, while Draco turned to face the others. There was a tense silence for a long moment until, to Draco’s surprise, the sandy blonde broke it.

“I’m Daniel,” he said as he rose to shake Draco’s hand. “I’m Charley’s boyfriend. That one over there is Charley.”

“Draco,” said Draco, giving him a firm shake. “I’m dating the maid of honor.”

“Yes, I’ve heard,” said Daniel in amusement. “It’s been a rather lively topic of conversation at the Weasleys’ this week. As I understand it, Harry and Ginny are in favor, as is Fleur. Mrs. Weasley has fully come around this week too, and Mr. Weasley follows whatever she says. Ron is decidedly against it, though he’s too afraid of Hermione to actually tell her that. Bill and Charley are reserving judgment. Percy’s got a stick up his arse about the whole ex-Death Eater thing, so he’s currently against. George here is a bit conflicted because he remembers you from school, but you also placed the largest fireworks order he’s ever received right before New Year’s Eve, so he acknowledges you may be good for business.”

“Merlin,” the wizard named Bill muttered.

Draco smirked. “I still have those fireworks. I bought them on the off-chance Hermione requested them at the New Year’s Eve ball instead of the ones Mother usually uses.”

George’s eyes widened. “You bought them and didn’t even shoot them off?”

Draco shrugged. “I planned to give Hermione whatever she wanted that night so she would go out with me. I dropped the idea in a letter to her, and I thought she might ask.”

Now George’s eyes narrowed as he considered this. “Could you convince your mother to switch to ours for future balls?”

“Sure,” said Draco. “She always asks for my input. I usually don’t have any, but I could tell her to switch, and I’m sure she would.”

Now George stood up and walked over to him. “Alright. You tell Narcissa to start using our products whenever she shoots off fireworks, and you make sure it’s mentioned in the papers the first time you do it. If you agree to that, then I’ll move off the fence and be in favor.”

Draco cocked his head and considered this. He had to admit that out of all the Weasleys, George intimidated him the most. He was unendingly creative, and if he decided to make Draco’s life a living hell he was sure to find a way to do it. His offer was a good one and very much in Draco’s favor. But perhaps Draco could get one more thing out of him.

“I’ll do that, provided you keep Ron in line, especially during any... nuptials, both this weekend and in the future. Hermione is terrified he and I are going to cause a scene.”

“Done,” said George instantly, and he and Draco shook on it.

Charley Weasley moved forward now. “I guess the decision is made for me since George is on board now, and you didn’t seem phased by Daniel.”

Draco smirked as he shook Charley’s hand too. “My best friends are gay. It definitely doesn’t phase me.”

They all looked surprised, but not displeased, at that piece of news.

Finally Bill sighed and stood to walk over too. “Alright, me too, I guess. In any event, Fleur will have my balls if I don’t.”

As Draco was shaking Bill’s hand the bathroom door opened and Potter and Weasley walked out. Weasley got a disgruntled look on his face.

“Really?” he said to his brothers in disbelief.

“Really, Ronnikins,” said George. “Draco’s convinced us, and you’re severely outnumbered. Now be a good boy and turn around. Those pants are far too loose on you.”

“It’s true,” said Daniel. “You’re arse wouldn’t be bad looking if the pants were a bit tighter.”

“Oh bloody hell...” said Weasley, but he turned around and gulped as Kreacher snapped his fingers and the pants became more tailored.

“Master Draco, sir?” croaked the elf. “What else needs to be done?”

Draco surveyed both of them with a critical eye. “Take in the shoulders of Potter’s coat a half inch. Shorten the cuffs a quarter inch. Different shoes, not quite as shiny – his are practically blinding. He needs his family ring, silver cufflinks, and do something with his hair, *please*.”

Kreacher got to work on those adjustments as he turned to stare at Weasley.

“For Weasley, lengthen the inseam and tighten everything around his arse just a bit more. His pants need to be longer too. He looks like he’s ready to wade through a lake dressed like that. Take in the back of his coat maybe a half inch and for fuck’s sake, teach him how to tie a bowtie. He looks ridiculous. Silver cufflinks for him too. They should match Potter’s if possible.”

Draco saw everyone staring at him in the mirror. “What?” he said. “I’m right. Watch.”

And sure enough, Kreacher made the requested adjustments, and both wizards suddenly looked like they were ready to step out of a magazine. Potter’s eyes widened as he looked at himself, and then he seemed to remember he was getting married tomorrow because he started to turn green.

“Don’t,” said Draco sharply.

Potter looked at him in the mirror. “Don’t you have any more... you know?”

“I already gave you some. You can’t have more until the evening. You have to control it.”

The others were looking between them in confusion, but Draco ignored them. He heard Potter mutter a soft, “fuck,” as he fought with his stomach. Draco gritted his teeth as he thought about it, and he suddenly came up with a solution.

“Pothead,” he said. Potter looked at him in the mirror. “I’ll bet you five hundred galleons you blow chunks all over Ginny’s dress tomorrow.”

Ron Weasley looked outraged, but Charley, Bill, and Daniel all snorted while George looked intrigued. To Draco’s relief, Potter’s coloring started to return to normal as he narrowed his eyes at Draco in the mirror.

“Deal,” he said, turning around. “Five hundred galleons says I *won’t*. Get ready to pony up you poncy prick.”

Draco smirked, and they shook on it.

“I want in on this too,” said George, looking between them. “I’ll bet somebody a hundred galleons he loses it.”

“I’ll take that bet,” called Bill. Then he cast a stern look at Potter. “Do *not* make me lose this bet, Harry.”

Harry looked grim. “If I lose the bet, the galleons are the least of my worries, Bill.”

“True,” chimed in Charley, who cast a speculative look at Draco. “Ginny will probably hex your balls off. Now Draco, since we have you here, why don’t you help the rest of us, yeah?”

Draco sighed.

An entire morning spent with the goddamned Weasleys.

It was only that night that Draco finally got Hermione all to himself. True, she was critical to The Vision, but Draco was very ready for The Wedding of the Year to be over so he could have his girlfriend back.

But at least he had her tonight, and now he had something to give to her.

“Here,” he said as he passed her a large box.

Hermione hesitated before opening it, and then her eyes got huge as she saw what was inside.

The Malfoy emeralds were a truly spectacular necklace and earring set, hundreds of years old, and some of the finest pieces in the Malfoy collection. They had been worn by the Ladies Malfoy for centuries and contained any number of protective enchantments for the wearer.

When Narcissa told Draco that Hermione was wearing green, he immediately asked if the emeralds would work for her dress. Narcissa's eyes took on a gleam of unholy excitement as she confirmed that yes, the shade of green would work and yes, her neckline would invite something like this. To Narcissa's credit, she managed to keep her enthusiasm under control and didn't press Draco about it further until he informed her that he would be going to Gringotts to get them the following day. Draco was relieved that she didn't pressure him about it for once and let it be his own decision.

Draco knew that his mother had relished putting the final touches on The Wedding of the Year. However, the fact that she had intervened with Muriel to acquire the tiara was really to ensure Hermione would wear the emeralds. Hermione wouldn't want to upstage the bride, so Ginny *had* to have something else. The Malfoy emeralds and the Potter diamonds were roughly equivalent in their opulence, and Hermione would never do it unless Ginny clearly exceeded her in some way.

And Draco wanted Hermione to do it. He wanted it more than he wanted anything else at this very moment for two reasons. First, while many of the guests wouldn't recognize them because his social circle didn't overlap with Potter's very much, the *press* would receive pictures of Hermione wearing them. Potter's wedding had finally given Draco the opportunity to make the public declaration he wanted to make.

And second, when the inevitable pictures emerged of maid of honor Hermione Granger on the arm of best man Ronald Weasley, the Malfoy emeralds around her neck would make it clear to every gossip columnist that Hermione and Weasley were not leaving their partners to pair up again.

Those two reasons had pushed Draco to seize the opportunity, and now here they were.

Hermione was still staring with wide eyes as Draco pulled the necklace out of the box. "I have to put it on you the first time," he said. "The charms won't accept your magic if I don't."

She looked at him curiously, but said nothing and just nodded as Draco unclasped it and placed it around her neck. She gasped as it shimmered a bit before returning to normal and settling in the dip of her clavicle.

"There," he said as he fixed the clasp. "That should do it."

"That was..." she trailed off. "It felt wonderful," she finally said quietly.

Draco nodded. "There are a lot of enchantments on it. You have a bit of a shield around you while you wear it. You'll deflect minor spells or any untoward advances from anybody but

me.”

“Really?” she said, looking at him in amazement. “Err... will I be able to dance with Harry or Ron? If they ask me, I mean?”

Draco dipped his head. “Yes, as long as they don’t mean anything by it but friendship. The necklace will prevent anybody who has a sexual interest in you from touching you, except for me.”

“Except for you...” she said, smiling a bit. “Is that because you put it on me?”

Draco nodded. “Yes, the necklace knows I picked you.”

“You picked me...” she repeated.

Draco nodded. “It recognizes my magic as the Malfoy heir. But I can only pick one witch to wear it. I can never give it to anybody else now, not even if you left me or died. As it stands, you and my mother are the only two witches alive who can wear it. It would burn anybody else who tried.”

Sunlight lit her face as she launched herself at Draco and started kissing him frantically.

He laughed as he fell back on the bed with Hermione on top of him.

“So you’ll wear it tomorrow then?” he said. “And the earrings? They don’t have the same magic as the necklace, but they are part of the set. I won’t lie, it’s going to send a very strong message when the press gets the pictures of you. But I want you to wear them mon coeur. I want everybody to know.”

“Yes,” she said between kisses. “Absolutely. I talked to Ginny about it, and she’s into it. And now that you’ve told me... well of course I’ll wear them, though I’m not sure what you plan to do with them on our little trip.”

“We can bring them with us,” he said. “I wouldn’t mind fucking you while you wear them a time or two. We can always return them to the goblins when we get back.”

She laughed as she pulled back to look at him. “Deal,” she said.

As it turns out, The Vision was absolutely perfect for The Wedding of the Year. Draco smiled a bit to see the look of pride and satisfaction on Narcissa's face as she surveyed the gardens just before the ceremony began. Draco, of course, had been tasked with keeping Potter upright and out of trouble, so he had spent most of the day with him and the other Weasley brothers. He and Ron Weasley hadn’t come to blows, and in fact Weasley softened toward

Draco just a bit once he learned that Draco convinced Potter to buy the new Firebolt, so Weasley was allowed to ride the old one.

As for Hermione, he had seen her frantically conjuring hundreds of flowers that his mother and the elves arranged. He plied her with a strengthening solution a couple of times so she could get through it all. She finally called her work complete a bit before two in the afternoon and went back to her room for a long nap. Draco hadn't seen her since.

Looking around, he had to admit that his mother had really outdone herself, and his girlfriend's transfiguration abilities were nothing short of masterful. There were a hundred and sixty matching chairs in the small garden, surrounded by roses, some of which Narcissa had ordered planted that very week to fit the color palette. Each row of chairs had flowers attached to it, and the arbor at the end was covered in them as well.

As Draco escorted his mother down the aisle, he was surprised to find he was seated relatively close to the front. The Weasleys, of course, filled the front two rows, but Draco and Narcissa were placed third. Draco would have a perfect view of Hermione from where he sat.

Before long, Potter emerged with a small tufty-haired wizard who would perform the ceremony with Weasley by his side. Once again he looked distinctly green. He caught Draco's eye, and Draco mouthed "five hundred galleons" to him. Weasley saw too, and grabbed Potter by the back of the coat to steady him. Potter visibly swallowed and nodded a little to steel himself, and then he turned to face the aisle as the music began.

First down the aisle was 4-year-old Teddy Lupin bearing the rings and then 3-year-old Victoire Weasley followed him with flower petals. She was rather particular, Draco noticed, and instead of throwing them, she was placing them on the aisle one at a time in a remarkably straight line for a toddler. Eventually Teddy got impatient, and he walked back down the aisle to grab her hand.

"Vicky come *on*," he insisted. Victoire, however, yanked her hand away from his and retaliated by dumping the rest of her petals over Teddy's head. Then she ran to the front before sitting down on the grass in front of Harry and sticking her thumb in her mouth.

Teddy's hair turned teal and momentarily threatened The Vision, before a stern look from his grandmother made him focus and change it back to brown. He came back to the front and also sat on the grass next to Victoire, though he turned his back on her with a huff.

Then it was Hermione's turn, and Draco thought she was the best part of The Vision so far. The floor length green chiffon dress hugged her breasts before dropping straight to the ground, and the emeralds flashed in the early evening light. Draco saw Dennis Creevy taking dozens of pictures of her as she approached the two wizards and children at the front, and then she saw Draco and gave him a dazzling smile.

"She's absolutely lovely," he heard Narcissa murmur in approval. "They suit her, Draco."

Draco just nodded, too emotional to say anything to that. She looked like a Malfoy dressed this way. Draco Savored it.

Before long the music changed, and now it was Ginny's turn. She was similarly stunning in a full gown that was off the shoulder and a small train. Draco turned to see Potter's reaction, and Potter looked like he had been hit by a bludger. Draco smirked as Creevy captured pictures of his expression.

The ceremony was swift, and within a half hour Potter and Ginny were declared married and bound for life. Draco had to admit he was moved by it. Potter looked transformed with happiness as the binding spell touched their hands. He saw Hermione's eyes had a suspicious mistiness, and Mrs. Weasley was openly sobbing into a handkerchief.

With the ceremony concluded, Hermione moved toward Weasley to be escorted back down the aisle, and Draco watched a bit curiously to see if the necklace would let him do it.

Hermione insisted they had both moved on years ago. Draco felt convinced that Hermione had done so, but he had never been certain about Weasley. To his slight surprise the necklace didn't stop Weasley from touching her, and Draco exhaled as something settled in him. He acknowledged and accepted that this was the third reason he wanted Hermione to wear the necklace tonight. He wanted to test Weasley to see if he had any lingering feelings.

But remarkably, Weasley passed the test, and he escorted Hermione to the end of the aisle before they went back to the front for pictures while the guests left for cocktails in the ballroom.

The ballroom, of course, was a key component of The Vision, and the elaborate flowers and drapings and those mad candles Narcissa made Hermione conjure made people gasp as they walked in. Draco caught a glimpse of David Fawley pointing at them excitedly to his parents, and Draco grinned. Draco and Potter had told David all about Hermione's work as transfiguration master during the defense lesson in Draco's ballroom a few days prior.

As for food, Narcissa had enlisted the help of Sully and the other Manor elves, and they were walking through the crowd with wine and small hors d'oeuvres, while one of the few vendors Potter had hired made mixed drinks behind a bar.

Draco thought everything was going quite well until Hermione came marching over to him in a bit of a snit near the end of the cocktail hour.

"What is it darling?" he asked.

"This blasted necklace!" she said. "It burned the bartender! I need you to go get me a vodka tonic."

Draco narrowed his eyes as he surveyed the bartender, who was looking very put out and nursing a burned hand. Kreacher had hurried over to help.

"Did he touch you?" asked Draco.

"I think our fingers brushed when he tried to pass me the drink. But then something burned him, and he knocked it over! It must be this necklace, it's the only explanation," she huffed.

Draco nodded once. "Stay here. I'm on it."

He strode over to the bartender and Kreacher. “Kreacher, Hermione would like a vodka tonic. And as for *you*,” he sneered at the bartender. “Back the fuck up and don’t touch the maid of honor. You won’t like what happens if you try again.”

The bartender looked outraged at first, but must have seen how serious Draco was about it, because he started to cower and nodded quickly.

Draco sneered one more time before taking the drink from Kreacher and bringing it back over to Hermione.

“I can’t believe this thing...” she muttered as she took a sip.

Draco just smirked, very satisfied that it worked as advertised and now wondering whether he could put similar enchantments on all of Hermione’s jewelry.

In fact, he found himself Savoring again as he thought about it.

The evening passed with only one other burn incident from the necklace – and it was Padma Patil who suffered this time when she tried to hug Hermione. Though to be fair, Hermione stopped touching people she didn’t know very well after the Padma incident. Draco thought it was a rather nice perk.

At long last the dinner was over, the dancing was done, and the guests lined up to see Harry and Ginny Potter spin away to their honeymoon in Greece, with a specially arranged portkey.

As it transpired, Hermione told Potter a bit about her trip with Draco, and Potter may have approached Draco to help him arrange something similar for Ginny for their honeymoon. Draco had put Potter in touch with a couple of his favorite charter companies and suggested a route that included Santorini and Mykonos. Of course, Draco only helped with it because Potter agreed to help Draco with a few things in return. It was certainly *not* because he was becoming friends with Potter.

With the Potters gone, the guests began to depart, and then Hermione caught his eye.

“Is it our turn yet?” she asked quietly. “I’m dying to get out of here.”

Draco leaned in for a kiss, Savoring the fact that the necklace let him do it, and then pulled away. “Go say your goodbyes and meet me upstairs. I’ll let Mother know we’re heading out.”

She beamed at him and then turned to find the rest of the Weasleys, while Draco strode toward Narcissa.

“Hermione and I are about to leave,” he said.

Narcissa had an anticipatory gleam in her eyes as she nodded. “Alright, I’ll make your excuses if any are needed.”

Draco nodded. “And I’ve put you on the small list of people who can send us mail while we’re away. You’ll keep me posted about what the papers are saying while we’re gone, yes?”

“Of course,” said Narcissa. “I had a rather fascinating chat with that unusual Lovegood girl. She told me *The Quibbler* will be releasing a special edition covering The Wedding of the Year tomorrow morning as a special favor to Harry and Ginny. Apparently she already has everything written – she’s just waiting for pictures from Mr. Creevey to come in late tonight. The Potters have authorized them to sell any photos they wish to *The Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly* tomorrow afternoon, so I imagine it will make the society pages by tomorrow evening. I promised Miss Lovegood a rather substantial contribution to her foundation for Crumple-Horned Snorcack research if she made sure to include several photos of Hermione as part of it.”

“Crumple-Horned Snorcacks?” asked Draco in confusion.

Narcissa just waved him off. “I don’t understand it myself dear, but it is no matter. Miss Lovegood was thrilled with the donation and said she would be happy to include plenty of photos of Hermione as part of it. Everyone is going to know what you did by tomorrow evening.”

“Perfect, Mother. Thank you,” he said. “Send along a copy to me if you would. And I’m sure Hermione would appreciate all of her magazines and such. It’s the first Sunday of the month tomorrow, and she’ll be getting a large delivery at the Manor.”

“Of course, dear. Now then... go find Hermione and get a move on, yes?”

Draco nodded and kissed his mother on the cheek and was just about to leave when he suddenly remembered.

“Oh and Mother... when the Potters get back from their honeymoon, send Harry an owl for me will you? I lost a bet and owe him five hundred galleons.”

Narcissa just rolled her eyes, but nodded before shoos him away again. Draco slipped out of the ballroom and made his way back up the stairs to Hermione’s room. She turned when he entered.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded. “You sent the bags ahead?”

“Yes, everything’s there already.”

“And you still won’t tell me exactly where we’re going?”

“I did tell you – Italy, France, Spain. Our itinerary is somewhat flexible.”

“You packed the guidebooks for me?”

“Of course, darling. And you already gave me your wish list. I promise I took it into account when I selected our ports.”

She smiled broadly. “Alright then, let’s do it.”

Draco moved to her nightstand and lifted an old-fashioned fountain pen off of it. “Same as last time, love. Touch it when you’re ready.”

She moved toward him and took a deep breath. As soon as her finger touched it, it glowed blue. Draco felt the familiar hook behind his navel as they spun together through the night, Hermione’s emeralds flashing on her neck. After several minutes they landed with a jolt, and Draco saw Hermione stand up to look around curiously.

“Welcome to Venice, mon coeur. Our boat is just ahead.”

Chapter 27: Wanderlust

Draco

Draco discovered there was something unexpectedly delightful about fucking Hermione Granger while she wore priceless jewelry. He liked it so much he had done it twice already, even though this was only their first full day in Venice. The fucking, of course, had taken place the night they arrived and again the following morning. Because unlike their first trip together, Draco and Hermione had decided to actually leave the boat when they were in port.

After their brief stop to see Knossos on the way home from Greece, Draco had been truly struck by Hermione's eagerness to climb over ancient Minoan ruins with him. It made him realize that they would probably enjoy traditional sightseeing together just as much as a true vacation. As somebody who had studied art and architecture growing up, Draco knew a lot about the treasures of this region. But thanks to Lucius's reluctance and Narcissa's insistence on spending port days shopping in boutiques, Draco had never seen some of the most famous muggle monuments except in books. He had been to Venice a half dozen times before, but only the wizarding sections. He had never seen the best parts of it.

So for this trip Draco gave Hermione some basic parameters: they would be visiting Italy, southern France, and Spain and sticking to muggle areas. They would be gone for seven weeks and spend most of their days in port, though they would have break days on the yacht here and there to relax. They would also be sailing on a different yacht this time for some variety and because Potter had actually booked the one they used previously after hearing Hermione rave about it.

Draco had chosen this particular yacht because it had some special amenities, one of which was an upright piano. He was willing to be without a piano for a week or two, but not seven. He played a couple things on it as soon as they arrived, and while it wasn't nearly as good as the piano at Hogwarts, it was sufficient to get the job done. Hermione had actually jumped him, after all.

But other than the addition of the piano and a couple other things, their yacht for this trip was otherwise rather similar to the one they had been on before. There was still a large deck for lounging and eating, and it had a small pool on one end. It was manned by a crew of invisible elves who would meet their every need. And after feeling the balmy weather the night they arrived, they decided to sleep outside when the weather permitted, though they did have a bedroom too for rainy days.

So they arrived in Venice their first night to find everything unpacked and ready to go. And after a couple of romps between the sheets, Draco entered the muggle world in Venice for the first time ever. It was more extraordinary than he had ever imagined.

They started with the Doge's Palace which blew them away, especially when they saw *Il Paradiso* in the main hall. They used a little bit of illegal magic to confound the muggle

tourists in the room, and before long they were left alone with the massive Tintoretto painting. They sat on the floor together and studied it for a solid half an hour before they were ready to move on.

Draco found Joy as he Savored it, and he rather thought Hermione did too.

After the Doge's Palace they had climbed the Campanile, and Hermione pulled out her muggle camera to take pictures of the harbor from the very top. Then to Draco's surprise she pulled out a pair of binoculars too in order to catch a glimpse of the islands in the distance.

After a quick lunch, Hermione convinced him to check out the Jewish quarter, which had a fascinating museum and was blessedly away from the crowds of the Piazza San Marco. It was an unexpected highlight that day.

Their first day in Venice had been long and exhausting, but also exhilarating, and Draco was thrilled to discover that he had been right. Their travel styles meshed. They enjoyed the same kinds of things. And now they each had a companion with whom they could share their mutual interests in art, history, and travel.

But traveling like this was also going to be tiring, and Draco suspected they would have to pace themselves. They made love in the pool that night while Hermione wore the emeralds again, and Draco had charmed it to be as warm as a hot tub for their sore muscles.

The next morning they headed to one of the places Draco had been anticipating for months.

"It's unbelievable," whispered Hermione as she stared around the mosaics that encrusted the ceiling and dome of St. Mark's Basilica. "According to my guidebook there are around 8,000 square meters of mosaics. It's mostly from the New Testament inside the church and the Old Testament in the atrium."

And truly, it *was* unbelievable. Draco had studied the church as a child of course, but he had never seen anything like this in real life. He and Hermione both gaped at it, as they walked through it very slowly, Hermione spewing off facts about it as they made their way toward the altar and then back.

After nearly two hours, they finally emerged, and Draco's heart started to race. He felt a distinct queasiness that reminded him of Potter, but Draco took a deep breath and forced himself to breathe.

"Darling, we have a little time before we're meeting Theo and Blaise for lunch. Let's check out the gift shop while we wait."

Hermione nodded agreeably to this, and Draco let her walk in first. As soon as he saw her absorbed in one of the large coffee table books on display, he subtly pulled out his wand and muttered, "*Revelio*."

The notice-me-not charm that Blaise and Theo had placed on one small shelf disappeared, and Draco eyed it.

He dithered for a moment until Hermione put the book away and started to meander around the perimeter of the shop. Draco held his breath, and his heart started to pound as he watched her get closer to the shelf and the thing Blaise and Theo had discovered here after scouring many other gift shops in muggle Venice for him. Draco had been on the other side of the world at the time, and Blaise and Theo had gone without him. They had returned to Spoleto on Draco's last day there, flush with success, and they told Draco they found the perfect thing. Draco was sure she wouldn't be able to resist it, and sure enough she slowed as she approached it.

"Oh!" she said in delight as she picked up the 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle of St. Mark's Basilica that was on the shelf.

Draco exhaled with relief and made his way over to her.

"Well we have to get that of course," he said with a small smile. "The book too if you want it."

"Are you sure?" she asked, as looked at the puzzle with some longing.

"Yes," he said firmly. "I don't think you've done one since you were poisoned. It's been so long I forgot to tell Sully to pack any. We'll have plenty of time for you to do it on the boat."

This was not, of course, strictly true. Draco hadn't forgotten at all. But at his words, Hermione lit up. "You're right. I'll probably only have time for one with everything we want to see, but this is perfect. St. Mark's was fascinating. And I did like that book..."

Draco smiled a little as they picked up the book too and made their way over to the cash register to pay. Then they stepped out into the warm July sun, hand-in-hand as they got ready to meet Blaise and Theo.

"Hermione, dearest, please tell your oaf of a boyfriend that this lunch counts as *two* meetings and not one. I beg you."

"Why's that?" she giggled as Theo gave a dramatic sigh.

They had been at "lunch" for nearly three hours now, and Draco had to admit he was shocked by how well Hermione was getting along with his best mates.

"I'm afraid I can't say just yet..." he trailed off, as he gave Blaise a significant look.

"I can," chimed in Blaise. "Theo wants to trade sex tips with you, but Draco made him promise at least three meetings before he raised the topic."

Draco smacked Blaise on the back of the head while Theo looked at Blaise adoringly. “Thank you, love. You always know when to jump in for me.”

Hermione just laughed and then turned a twinkling eye to Draco. “This definitely counts as two meetings, Draco. Maybe even three. We’ve been here long enough for several lunches already.”

Draco felt his mouth twitch at Theo’s triumphant look. “Alright, fine. If you want to hear about Theo’s forays into sexual submission I’m certainly not going to stop you.”

“Oooh!” Hermione’s eyes lit up as she turned to Theo. “That’s so fascinating! I have *so* many questions. I don’t know if I’m always doing it right, you know, though I think Draco is rather pleased...”

Draco and Blaise both gaped at her while Theo looked like Christmas came early. Then he turned to Blaise and Draco and said, “Alright you two clear out and go do something else. Hermione and I have much to discuss without you.”

Draco’s jaw dropped, and Theo said, “Don’t look at me like that. Just give us an hour. I’m sure both of you will benefit from our little tete-a-tete.”

Hermione was struggling not to laugh, as Draco and Blaise both rolled their eyes but agreed to leave their significant others alone to trade notes. Draco threw some euros on the table and then led Blaise to a bar across the street.

“I was not expecting that,” said Blaise in amusement. “But she’s wonderful, Draco. Truly.”

Draco smiled broadly at this. “I know. I’m fucking obsessed with her.”

Blaise chuckled. “I can tell. But now that I have you alone, I need to know... did she find it?”

Draco nodded. “Yeah, we bought it and dropped it off at the boat just before meeting you two.”

Blaise clapped him on the shoulder. “Excellent mate. I can’t believe you pulled it off.”

Draco nodded, in slight disbelief himself that their plan had actually worked. “I know. Now it’s just about controlling the timing.”

Blaise raised his eyebrows. “I thought you were keeping your itinerary flexible?”

Draco nodded. “That’s true. I am. But she’ll suspect something’s up if I skip anything major on her list before we get there.”

“You’ll do it,” said Blaise encouragingly. “And if you need to slow her down, I gave you that whole list of smaller places you could visit to wear her out. Or dominate her. That’s the other possibility.”

Draco smirked. “I think I’ll take option B.”

Blaise laughed. "You'll also need this," he said, as he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to Draco. "Don't open it until you're ready."

"Got it," said Draco nodding. "Thanks for arranging it. I ran out of time."

"No worries, mate. Theo and I approve. Now in other news, have you seen the papers about Potter's wedding? The coverage was unbelievable. And Hermione's necklace sure made an impression."

Blaise looked at Draco knowingly. Draco just smiled as they began to discuss.

They spent three weeks circling the boot of Italy and barely scratched the surface. After two full days in Venice proper they spent a day in the outer islands in Murano and Burano. There they visited the glass shops and the colorful homes on the islands. They also took a special trip to San Michele to visit Igor Stravinsky's grave, and it made Draco oddly emotional to see it. He played some pieces in his honor on the piano that night.

Then they finally set sail and spent the following day in Ravenna to visit the Basilica di San Vitale. The day after that they docked in Pescara to apparate to Assisi to see the Basilica of Saint Francis, which was a true highlight.

Draco had to admit that a theme was already emerging. While Hermione wasn't at all religious and Draco didn't have a muggle upbringing, they both deeply appreciated the history and architecture of the muggle churches they got to visit. Hermione pointed out they didn't have to be religious to be impressed. Draco agreed enthusiastically, and they started to scour Hermione's guidebooks for more churches along the way.

They spent the next two days in open water while they sailed around the boot to Sicily. At Draco's insistence, Hermione spent those two days naked, except for a few scraps of lace and one more round with the emeralds for good measure.

Draco thought she might open the puzzle during those two days, but she didn't, declaring their first few days in Italy on the heels of the wedding to be so exhausting she just needed to relax. So Draco happily let her do it, as he watched her nude body turn brown in the sun. During those two days she only moved for food and sex. Those two days also allowed them both to get caught up on the news and Hermione's Sunday crossword puzzle that Narcissa had sent along.

Thus ended their first week.

They began their second week in Sicily, which they condensed to two days, though they promised each other to return another time to see more. They spent their first day in Palermo to see the Palermo Cathedral and Norman Palace, before spending their second day in the

Valley of the Temples. This gave them their first real taste of Roman ruins, and Hermione and Draco were instantly hooked.

Then they sailed up to the Amalfi coast and spent three full days here putzing around the beautiful towns and sailing the waters, before visiting the ruins in Pompeii and Herculaneum. This was another true highlight, as they wandered the excavations for a full day and marveled at the frescoes in the Villa of Mysteries.

With the exception of their day in Pompeii, Sicily and Amalfi were both slower paced, and that gave them the energy to truly push themselves when they finally got to Rome, where their second week ended and their third began.

Draco had been really looking forward to this, and while he knew that the four days he had allotted for muggle Rome would barely satisfy him, it would be a taste, and he was sure they would come back for more at some point. After some input from Hermione and her guidebooks, along with a consultation with Blaise, they divided their days up thus: one day for the Colosseum and Forum, one day for the Vatican, one day for other churches and the Borghese Gallery, and one day for anything they didn't get to during their first three. Thank Merlin they could apparate between things because Rome was huge with poor public transit, and they needed to save their feet for the actual sites.

Their foray to the Vatican was the only thing during their entire seven weeks that was scheduled for a particular day. After discussing the trip with Blaise, he had absolutely insisted they visit the excavations under St. Peter's and take what was known as the "Scavi Tour." As it happened, Blaise and Theo had started to explore muggle Italy too, and Blaise had surprised Theo with it once. They both raved about it. But unfortunately, there wasn't a way to do it without advanced reservations. Blaise told Draco he had tried to confound the guard and break in to see it before taking Theo there, but he was surprised to find it warded.

Evidently the Vatican knew about magic.

So Draco had applied to take the tour the muggle way after Blaise assured him it was worth the effort and inconvenience, and they had been assigned a time and date for it.

Draco wasn't much for guided tours, preferring instead to read placards and listen to Hermione's recital of information from her guidebooks. But to see the excavations under St. Peter's they had to join a tour. And Draco was so blown away by it he resolved to send Blaise a bottle of very good wine from the Malfoy cellars as soon as they returned. It was an entire afternoon of Savoring.

Their guide was an actual archaeologist who explained that St. Peter's had been built on top of a Roman burial site as a show of Christian dominance. And under the floors of the basilica they discovered an entire necropolis: a city of the dead where researchers found the remains of ancient people from all over the world and one of the earliest known depictions of Christ in western art. She showed them the bones that were supposedly St. Peter himself, and then the tour ended in the tiniest chapel Draco had ever seen, with nearly every surface encrusted with gold and gems. It was like being inside an exceptionally ornate jewelry box.

The tour had astonished them, and then they were shocked again when they were led into the basilica itself, and they finally saw the inside of St. Peter's for the first time.

"Holy fuck," said Draco as he stared around in utter amazement and the scale of it. A nun nearby heard him and crossed herself in shock.

Rome was everything Draco hoped it would be, and Draco spent his days there filled with Joy.

They both agreed that the tour under St. Peter's was the best thing they did in Rome, but they debated with themselves about the second best: was it the Vatican museums, which ended in the Sistine chapel? Was it the Roman Forum, which they both agreed was superior to the Colosseum? Or was it the Borghese gallery with the fantastic collection of Bernini statues? Draco thought the second best thing *might* have been seeing one of those Bernini statues in situ, as they stared at *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* that was housed in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria.

"That's exactly what you look like when you're climaxing, love," commented Draco, as he studied the statue with interest. "So if you're Theresa, I guess that makes me a goddamn angel."

Hermione, predictably, rolled her eyes, and countered that the Protestant cemetery where John Keats and Percy Shelley were buried might have been her second favorite thing. She discreetly conjured flowers for each.

After utterly exhausting themselves in Rome, Hermione and Draco decided to skip Florence with great reluctance and propose a Tuscany trip to Theo and Blaise at a later date so they could give that region the time it deserved. As it was, their last four days in Italy were spent alternating between naked days on the boat to recover and days spent exploring the small towns of Cinque Terre.

It was on the second to last evening in Italy that Draco walked into their bedroom to discover that Hermione had finally opened the puzzle box.

Draco smiled as he wandered toward his nearly nude girlfriend who was in the middle of sorting pieces with a glass of wine in her hand. He saw she had thrown a copy of *The Sunday Prophet* to the side with the headline that blared "WHEN WILL DRACO DO IT?" He knew the article was speculating about them.

Draco just grimaced at it. Thankfully, Hermione seemed largely unperturbed by the media firestorm Draco had caused by asking her to wear the emeralds to the Potter wedding. As it was, Draco was fully prepared for what it would do, and it made the timing of their trip even better. He had sent a strong message through the pureblood world with the gesture, but the fallout also couldn't touch them here unless they wanted it to. Narcissa had kept them apprised of course, but she was screening most of their mail for them.

"Think you'll have time to finish it love?" he asked as he approached her.

“Oh yes, I imagine so. Assuming you give me a break from sex now and then to actually work on it.”

Draco leaned down behind her and ran an appreciative hand over her breasts and started to suckle her neck. “That might prove challenging,” he murmured.

Hermione sighed into him. “Draco. Let me puzzle.”

“Fine,” he said, pulling away. “But I’m cutting you off after two hours mon coeur. I want a romp tonight.”

She chuckled as he moved away to snatch his own glass of wine as he settled in to watch her. He saw her cheeks starting to color.

“What on earth are you doing?” she finally asked.

“Just enjoying the view. You know I like to look.”

She said nothing to that, but her cheeks flushed and stayed a pretty pink for a full hour before she finally gave up.

“Ok *fine* you can have your romp! I can’t concentrate like this!”

Draco smiled broadly as he put his wine down and led her toward the bed. “I knew you would see things my way.”

It was only later that night, after he had exhausted her with a couple of orgasms and pretended to fall asleep next to her that he slipped out of bed. They had slept in their bedroom that night after receiving a note from the elves assuring them it was supposed to rain that evening.

With his girlfriend in the room, Draco muttered some silencing charms so she wouldn’t hear him. Then he dressed quickly, and made his way silently toward the puzzle.

He studied it for a long while before finding the piece he wanted, and he picked it up to look at it closely. He sensed the faintest trace of magic on it. He furrowed his brow for a moment before looking back at his girlfriend, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He crossed back over to her and picked up her wand that was on her nightstand and pointed it to the puzzle piece. “*Finite incantatum*,” he whispered.

Sure enough, the tracking spell that she had placed on it before he arrived disappeared.

“Ha!” he whispered. “Nice try, love.”

He placed her wand back on the nightstand and then walked to his side of the bed where he grabbed his own wand to mutter a different spell over the puzzle piece. He looked at it one more time and then observed her closely to make sure she was sleeping soundly while hugging a pillow that Draco had slipped into her arms.

She was so beautiful like this, so innocent. She didn't look like a witch who could kick his arse when she finally discovered what he was about to do. Draco Savored the moment.

But she could kick his arse, and she might do it. Draco wondered if she would actually kill him this time.

What a way to go though.

Chuckling to himself he opened the drawer of his nightstand and pulled out the small thing that was wrapped in a cloth that Blaise had given to him during their lunch in Venice. He opened it, and a marble rolled out onto the bed. Draco stuffed the cloth into another pocket and then touched the marble. It glowed blue for a moment before Draco felt the familiar hook behind his navel, and he spun away into the darkness.

Hermione

Southern France was truly stunning. During their two weeks there they fell into a routine with mornings spent sight-seeing before finding a restaurant wherever they were for a late lunch. Afternoons were spent with a bit more sight-seeing before heading back to the yacht with enough time for a swim or shag before dinner. In the evenings they usually stayed in and Draco played the piano while Hermione read or worked on her crosswords, though there were a few times Draco took her back to shore for dinner.

Along the way they spent a couple days in Nice and St. Tropez for the old towns and beaches before heading to Monaco. While in Monaco Draco compared the size of his yacht to some of the others that were docked there and declared himself well-satisfied, as Hermione rolled her eyes. Then he surprised her with a fancy dress and took her gambling in Monte-Carlo that night.

"I'm going to lose all your money," she objected.

"I can assure you, that's not possible love."

From there they docked in Marseille for several days, which they used as a point to apparate to the small towns in Provence just to the north.

One day was spent visiting the papal palace in Avignon and the nearby vineyards in Chateauneuf-du-Papes.

Then they spent a delightful Sunday morning visiting one of the largest outdoor markets Hermione had ever seen in L'Isle-Sur-la-Sorgue, which was an utterly charming village surrounded by a moat. The market took over the entire town, and she found several books there to bring home.

After that they apparated to nearby Gordes and Abbaye de Notre Dames de Senanque. It was one of the most beautiful places Hermione had ever seen, and she spent nearly an hour photographing the old abbey which had fields of lavender in front of it.

They took a day off to relax on the boat before spending a morning in Baux-de-Provence, where they towered over the countryside in the old ruined castle. Hermione pulled out her binoculars and sure enough, she could see details miles away. Speaking of ruins, that afternoon they apparated to Orange, which blew them both away with its collection of Roman ruins. It was nearly devoid of tourists, and Hermione and Draco felt like they had the place almost all to themselves.

Having scoured Hermione's guidebooks for ideas, they also visited Arles. They quickly decided it was one of the best cities they had visited thus far, and they had spent the entire day there visiting the Roman arena and amphitheater, in addition to the necropolis. There was also a Roman bath house and some sites dedicated to Vincent Van Gogh, who had lived there for a time. They ended the day with a quick trip to the Abbaye de Montmajour, which gave them more fantastic views. Hermione fell in love with the place.

For their final day in Provence they saved the best for last. By now both Hermione and Draco learned they absolutely adored ruins, and the ruins in France were often better preserved than those in Italy. So for their final day there, they selected the piece-de-resistance: the Pont du Gard, which was followed by an afternoon in nearby Nimes.

"My God," breathed Hermione as she looked up at it. Draco was beside her, absolutely speechless.

Hermione kept telling herself it was just an aqueduct. It *really* shouldn't be this impressive. But it was so large and so well-preserved that she couldn't help herself. She just gaped.

Nimes proved to be similarly delightful. It was larger and a bit more urban than some of the other places they had visited in Provence, but its Roman amphitheater, which could seat 24,000 in its heyday was shockingly well-preserved. Draco also got to see the Maison Carree, which he told Hermione he had studied extensively as a child. Hermione thought he got a bit emotional when he finally saw it in real life.

They spent another day cruising and relaxing before spending a couple days in Montpellier. This was very different than where they had just been. They were back to more modern things now, in a manner of speaking, as they visited the Cathedrale St. Pierre and the Musee Fabre.

And now having been on their yacht for five full weeks, Hermione and Draco turned south as they cruised toward Spain.

It was August now, and Spain was bloody hot. Draco informed her they were dropping the yacht off in Barcelona, so they planned to cruise far south first before working their way back up north along the coast.

They changed things up yet again and took Spain in small doses. Due to the heat they focused on one thing in the mornings before retreating back to the boat in the afternoons

when the sun got high. They found themselves taking a siesta most afternoons before reemerging again in the early evenings. The Spanish, thankfully, largely kept to the same schedule.

It took them two full days to sail from Montpellier all the way down to Almeria, during which time Hermione got caught up on her Sunday crossword puzzles that she had missed over the previous weeks. And once they were there, they used Almeria as an apparition point to visit the Alhambra in Granada, which thoroughly enchanted them both. The architecture was like nothing they had ever seen before, and they vowed to return again someday.

Then they spent a morning in Jaen to see the enormous cathedral there and to take in the olive groves that surrounded the charming town.

Another morning was spent in Cordoba to see the former mosque, which had been converted to a cathedral in the thirteenth century and had a church built in the sixteenth century right smack dab in the middle of it. It was one of the most interesting and oddest places Hermione and Draco had ever visited, and they agreed it made their top five list so far.

They finished southern Spain with two mornings in Seville to see the Alcazar, the cathedral, and the Plaza de Espana. They loved Seville so much they vowed to revisit when it wasn't quite so sweltering.

Then they started to cruise north toward Valencia.

That evening while Draco was playing the piano Hermione sighed to herself as she read the latest paper Narcissa had forwarded to them.

Will He or Won't He?

By Rita Skeeter

After news broke of The Wedding of the Year, it soon became clear that Harry and Ginny Potter weren't the only couple who disappeared right after the reception.

The Potters, of course, went on their honeymoon to Greece. Guests of the wedding reported that they were surrounded by family and friends as their portkey whisked them away for two weeks of romance and sunshine.

But unbeknownst to most of the guests, the Potter portkey wasn't the only one activated that night. Maid of Honor Hermione Granger also disappeared with Draco Malfoy, presumably while wearing his family's emeralds around her neck.

It caused no small amount of whispers and speculation when the famed Malfoy emeralds showed up at the Potter wedding. They are, after all, very well-known, having been worn by Malfoy brides for centuries. So when Hermione Granger stood at the altar next to two wizards she had previously dated, while wearing gems given to her by a third, rumors

abounded that she had finally executed her plan and convinced one of them to make an honest witch out of her.

But then the couple disappeared, and neither one has been seen since. They have not responded to a multitude of owls sent by this reporter or others and appear to have all but vanished.

After six weeks of silence, we're now uncertain of where the couple stands. At the Potter wedding it appeared that Draco Malfoy was well on his way to proposing, if he hadn't done so already. But as the days stretched to weeks with no further news, this reporter wonders if perhaps Miss Granger played her hand too soon.

According to Lady Narcissa Malfoy, the couple is traveling together "somewhere in the Mediterranean," though she has provided no further details.

And when this reporter reached out to Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini, who are two of Draco Malfoy's oldest friends and Italian residents, they confirmed they had met the couple for lunch nearly six weeks ago. However, they haven't been seen since.

"It was nice to meet Hermione," said Blaise Zabini. "She's lovely."

But this reporter can't help but wonder: if Mr. Malfoy was really set on proposing, why hadn't his dearest friends met her before now? Why did they meet for a brief lunch, instead of a longer visit to get to know each other better? And where are they now, seeing as how the honeymoon of The Chosen One and his bride ended a month ago?

The notion that they have been traveling in the Mediterranean all this time is utterly preposterous of course. They would have been seen in one of the wizarding areas if that were true. As it stands, our colleagues in Italy, France, Spain, Greece, and other countries in the region have had no sightings of them.

This reporter can only conclude one thing: Draco Malfoy hasn't asked that all-important question yet, and now Hermione Granger is in hiding. Evidently he is reconsidering (assuming he ever planned to do it in the first place). Miss Granger got ahead of herself, and now she's licking her wounds as she waits for the axe to fall.

While we wait for news of the couple — if that word can even be used anymore — we do know one thing. In two weeks Hogwarts begins again, so they will both be forced to reemerge from wherever they have been hiding all summer. It is certain that the students and staff at Hogwarts will be watching them with bated breath to learn the truth: will he or won't he?

If this author were a betting witch, she would place her stakes on "he won't."

Hermione sighed as she finished reading the latest article. She had been doing an excellent job of ignoring the press during their last six weeks, but Rita always did have a way of

getting under her skin. And as much as Hermione was loathe to admit it, Rita might have a point this time.

Draco had made a grand gesture at Harry and Ginny's wedding that Hermione had happily gone along with because she thought she understood what it meant. But if she was being honest with herself, she had rather expected the grand gesture to be followed by a very important question as soon as they were alone together on their trip. In her mind, they could get engaged, let Narcissa know, and then have the engagement party she was sure Narcissa would insist upon before they ever went back to Hogwarts. They would be returning to England with a week to spare before school started back.

Opportunities had abounded, but he hadn't asked her. In fact, he had hardly even talked about their future together during their last six weeks, other than the things they would be seeing and doing on their trip.

After their first week on the yacht, he had even stopped asking her to wear the emeralds during sex. Hermione had told him how much she liked it, and he seemed to really like it too. But by the time they reached Sicily, Draco had locked them away in the onboard safe, protected with a drop of his blood and a numeric code. Hermione knew the pieces were very valuable and needed to be locked up. Even on a magical boat, theft was a concern when they were in port for hours most days. But it was locked away with his blood and not hers, so she couldn't just put them on whenever she wanted to. Hermione knew she could ask him to open the safe for her, but she hesitated. The emeralds were clearly still his — not hers — and she wanted it to be his idea.

But he hadn't had the idea in over a month.

Hermione was trying not to let it get to her. Draco kept saying that he was "savoring" their trip, and he was certainly an enthusiastic travel partner. He told her he loved her frequently, and they had plenty of sex, sans ancient family gems. He seemed to take delight in everything they were doing together on this trip, and he was living in the moment. Hermione herself was having an incredible time as well, she really was.

But Rita's article hit her just the right way to fill her mind with insecurities and questions. Would he ever do it? Really? Or had Draco just gotten caught up in the excitement of the wedding when he let her wear that necklace? Or worse — had *Narcissa* told him to do it? Maybe Draco figured he would give it to her eventually, so he allowed Narcissa to strongarm him to support The Vision.

And finally, how much longer would she really have to wait? Hermione didn't know, but she had a hard time savoring *that* thought. She knew they hadn't been dating that long, but her feelings were strong. She thought his were strong too. And all of her friends were getting married, dammit. She was feeling more than a little left out.

At this point, Hermione knew any hopes of an engagement party before going back to Hogwarts were futile. They only had two weeks left before term began, and that wouldn't be enough time to plan something that would make Narcissa happy. And with only one week left to go on the trip itself, Hermione was starting to think that this wouldn't be her summer after all. Maybe Draco wanted a year of real teaching under his belt before he asked her.

Chastising herself for her morose thoughts and impatience, she threw the paper aside. Draco heard her and turned to give her a curious look from the piano. She forced herself to smile at him. He narrowed his eyes a bit as he eyed her and then the paper, but he didn't say anything about it as he turned back to his piano and continued to play.

Don't let it get to you, Hermione. Be like Draco and savor what we're doing right now.

Thanks to bloody Rita Skeeter, that was much easier said than done.

Chapter 28: Puzzles

Chapter Notes

A/N: If I had to pick one chapter that's my favorite, it would be this one. It was really fun to write.

Please mind the tags at the top. If anything makes you uncomfortable you may want to skip Draco's section.

Hermione

It was the evening after their day in Valencia that Hermione finally turned back to her jigsaw puzzle she had started three weeks earlier.

Hermione had been unusually quiet that day, her thoughts still on *The Daily Prophet* article from the night before. Normally she would be spewing dates and facts and chattering nonstop, but she couldn't bring herself to do it that day. She looked at the cathedral with a wistful sigh, and even Draco's irreverent comments about the very modern architecture of the Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias didn't pull her out of her funk.

She caught Draco watching her, studying her, but he didn't say anything to her about it until they were back on the yacht.

"Something seemed a little off today, love. Why don't you work on your jigsaw puzzle tonight and see if that helps? You're almost done with it, and I want to read up on Toledo before we go tomorrow."

Hermione agreed, figuring that maybe it *would* help. Puzzles usually gave her brain a bit of a reset when she needed it, and she couldn't deny that she needed it now. Toledo was supposed to be amazing, and she had been looking forward to it ever since Draco told her he thought they could fit it into their itinerary. She didn't want it to be ruined like Valencia had been.

So she settled back down to her jigsaw puzzle and decided she really would finish it tonight. She was close enough, and it would be very satisfying to see it complete. She had been working on it here and there, on and off, for the last three weeks, but she hadn't been in a rush. They had so much to do that most of the time she spent on it had been during their few days on the yacht. She had taken her time with it.

It was only now, as she got to the very end, that she realized there were three pieces left and four holes to fill.

“That giant ARSE!” she shouted.

This was too much. *Really* it was too much, especially on top of all the frustration and anxiety she had been feeling since that article the previous night. She wanted to scream in frustration.

Unfortunately Draco didn’t hear her, because he was out on the deck, lounging in the balmy evening air with the guidebook. Hermione fought to control her temper as she placed the three pieces she *did* have left and then stared at the one he had stolen.

It was the piece that contained the very center of the middle cross on the top of St. Mark’s Basilica. Of *course* he would steal something like that. It was positively infuriating.

She grabbed her wand and held it flat in her palm as she cast the location charm and concentrated hard on the piece she needed to find. Her jaw dropped as her wand started to spin in a circle. It seemed to think that all the pieces were there. She tried again as the same thing happened.

Hermione stared at her wand for a long moment until the truth finally struck her.

He had deactivated her location charm.

At this, Hermione felt her temper truly boiling over. She threw her wand to the side because she didn’t trust herself with it at this point. She might do permanent damage to him if she had it. Even without it, she was pretty sure she was about to throw him overboard.

She stormed out of their bedroom to find her boyfriend lounging with his eyes closed, a glass of wine and the guidebook on a little table next to him, looking perfectly relaxed.

“WHERE THE HELL IS IT?!” she shouted.

Draco opened one eye to look at her. “Where the hell is what, love?”

“DON’T PLAY DUMB WITH ME! MY PUZZLE PIECE! WHERE THE HELL DID YOU HIDE IT?!”

Now Draco opened his other eye and stared at her a bit dreamily.

“You’re so gorgeous when you get all fired up about something you know. It really turns me on.”

“OH FOR *HEAVEN’S* SAKE! I AM *THIS* CLOSE TO GETTING MY WAND AND... AND...”

Hermione was so outraged she couldn’t even think straight to finish the threat. She looked at Draco and noticed he was studying her with deep appreciation. It was only now that Hermione realized the robe she was wearing had opened as she shouted at him.

She huffed and yanked it closed again. “I think *NOT!*”

Draco sighed with disappointment before looking at her thoughtfully. Then he gave her a full blown Malfoy smirk with the eyebrow and everything.

Hermione knew that look and didn't trust it for a moment. She narrowed her eyes.

"You want your piece back?" he asked.

"*Obviously!*" she snarled.

"Then first thing's first. Take your robe off and come sit on my lap. I want a kiss."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Oh of *all* the nerve!"

"I'm serious," he said. "Take your robe off, sit on my lap, and come kiss me. You won't get anything from me until you do."

Hermione snorted and ground her teeth. She stood there for several long moments as she debated it with herself. He was staring at her in a way that made her blood heat, despite the fact that she had had a truly horrendous day, and she was angrier with him than she could ever remember.

She bit her lip as she stared at him, still not saying anything just yet.

"Robe off. Now," he said sharply, and now he was using his dominant voice that turned Hermione's brain off and made her melt. Almost unconsciously she felt herself opening her robe for him. She was both incredibly angry and unbelievably turned on. She didn't know it was possible to feel both at once.

"Good girl," he crooned. To Hermione's consternation, she felt it between her thighs.

"Now come sit on my lap and give me a kiss. Then maybe I'll give you something too."

Hermione approached slowly. She paused when she got to him, but he just raised one eyebrow at her, seemingly perfectly content to wait her out. Finally huffing with frustration, Hermione sank down in his lap. He immediately started palming her breasts.

"There now..." he said. "Was that so hard? Are you really that mad at me?"

"I'm furious," she insisted, but she was gasping as he started to run his hands all over her.

"Then give me my kiss darling so I can give you something too. And make it a good one."

Hermione knew he had won. She didn't like it, and she was still angry with him about it, but dammit she *needed* to finish this puzzle to banish all thoughts of Rita Skeeter from her mind. Admitting defeat for now, she leaned forward and kissed him, and he grabbed her face in his hands and deepened it until she was breathless. Finally he pulled away and released her as he gave her devastating smile. She watched him pick up his wand. "Alright, then. *Accio.*"

He pointed his wand to something on a nearby table she hadn't noticed, and it came flying toward them. She quickly realized it was *not* her puzzle piece.

“What the hell...?” she asked, but Draco just handed it to her. It was a piece of paper. She unfolded it and read it.

Take a dip, the skinnier the better.

She looked at him and narrowed his eyes. “You’re going to make me skinny dip before I get my puzzle piece back?”

He gave her a negligent shrug. “You know I like it. And conveniently, you’re already naked.”

She rolled her eyes at this in annoyance, but she saw his eyes were dancing. “Oh *fine*,” she huffed as she stood up and marched over to the swimming pool on the other side of the deck. Draco rose to follow. She sat on the edge of the pool and jumped in before immediately hopping out again. “There, happy? Can I have my piece now?”

“Oh I don’t have it,” said Draco seriously. “You’ll need to find it.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped, and he just chuckled at the look on her face.

“You’re so lovely when you want to kill me, mon coeur. I’m ridiculously hard.”

“Oh *please!*” she said, as she rolled her eyes. To her annoyance, this didn’t seem to deter him at all. He just gave her his sexiest smile.

“For fuck’s sake, *tell me* Draco. Where is it?”

He shrugged. “I gave you a clue, didn’t I?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she grabbed the paper that she had left on the edge of the pool and read it again.

Take a dip, the skinnier the better.

She looked at the pool behind her, as the realization of what she would have to do washed over her.

“Oh my God, you hid it in the bloody *swimming pool!*!”

He grinned unabashedly. “See for yourself, love.”

Hermione huffed, and Draco settled in to watch. It was evening, and even with lights on around the deck, the pool itself was dark. She couldn’t see clearly in the depths. It took her

nearly half an hour of searching every crevice with her hands and feet before she finally found a small metal case that he had attached near one lower corner. She tried to use her foot to bring it up to the surface, but Draco just shook his head.

“What did your note say?”

“Take a dip,” she groaned. She would have to submerge fully.

He raised an eyebrow and smirked again.

“I’m going to murder you, I hope you know that,” she muttered.

“I find the notion strangely erotic, princess,” he responded.

Finally admitting defeat she took a deep breath and dove. “AHA!” she shouted in triumph as she emerged, holding it aloft.

He just nodded in acknowledgement as she opened it, expecting to find her puzzle piece. Instead, she found another note.

You’ll find me on the other side of the rainbow.

She looked at him in confusion and dismay. “And what the hell does *this* mean?” she demanded.

To Hermione’s consternation he just knelt down by the side of the pool and tapped her on the nose. “Think on it, darling. I’m sure it will come to you eventually. Now I’m going to turn in. Your guidebook made me very excited to see Toledo tomorrow. We’ll need our energy for it.”

He turned to walk away from her as Hermione exhaled.

Bloody hell. I’m going to kill him.

Toledo, it transpired, *was* incredible. They apparated from the port in Valencia to find one of the most perfectly charming places they had visited thus far. The medieval town was set high on a hill with the Alcazar the star of the skyline. It was a fascinating blend of early Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cultures, all of which peacefully coexisted at one time in the small city. They toured a synagogue from the 1300s. They visited the El Greco museum, which was devoted to the famous artist who once lived in Toledo and produced his most mature work

while he was there. They saw a beautiful monastery, and the cathedral in particular was jaw-dropping. Hermione couldn't believe the opulence of it, especially the area behind the altar that was encrusted in gold from the new world.

And while she was still incredibly annoyed with Draco and found herself happily dreaming of his demise, there was a tiny part of her that was grateful for him too. Somehow between their notably one-sided fight and the skinny dipping and now the new clue she had to solve, she was no longer dwelling on Rita Skeeter. Instead, she was dwelling on that maddening note he had buried at the bottom of the swimming pool.

She couldn't stop thinking about it during quieter moments. She found herself puzzling over his odd clue on and off for most of the day as she wandered through the incredible architecture surrounding her. It didn't necessarily distract her from the things she was seeing, but rather it gave her something to think about during the inevitable lulls — she was thinking hard as they waited for food, stood in line, and had conversations in very broken Spanish about tickets. A few times she was so lost in thought about it she even forgot to be mad at Draco.

Just like the day before she caught Draco studying her quite a bit. But this time he seemed to be amused instead of concerned. She huffed in annoyance.

It wasn't until the following morning that inspiration finally struck. *Rainbow. Find me on the other side of the rainbow.*

She went to check the piano bench, knowing he had brought some muggle music with him on their trip. She hadn't heard him play *this* piece on their trip yet, but maybe...

She lifted the lid of the bench and sifted through the pieces he had stored there until she found *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. She had once told him it made her very emotional the first time she heard him play it. She was sure she would have cried if she hadn't been a cat at the time.

She opened it up and flipped through it, and there, on the very last page was a piece of paper taped to it. She pulled it off and turned it over to find a crossword puzzle that looked similar to *The New York Times*, except nearly all the clues were blank.

The only clue that was written on it was for 1 Across: "Your specky best friend."

Hermione felt a reluctant smile tug her lips as she made her way over to her nightstand to grab a pen, and then she wandered out on deck. She found Draco lounging again, enjoying the sunshine. They were spending the entire day on the yacht as they sailed north.

No time like the present.

He opened one eye and just smiled to himself when he saw her with the sheet of paper, but he didn't say anything as he closed it again.

As for Hermione, she sat down with her pen. She counted six squares for 1 Across and wrote POTTER in them.

She gasped as the clue for 1 Down now appeared: “Ginny’s word of condemnation.”

What on earth?

It was four letters, and it started with a P. It took her nearly ten minutes of thinking before she finally tried PRAT, and then she snorted with repressed laughter as the puzzle accepted it, and the clue for 2 Down now shimmered into appearance.

It was a magical crossword puzzle. He had written her a magical crossword puzzle that was as large as *The New York Times*, but was sure to be much harder because she would have to answer each clue in order before the next one appeared. She couldn’t jump around and knock out the low hanging fruit first.

True, some of them were simple, and he had given her a very easy one to start. In addition to the first clue, she had no trouble at all when she got to “Weasel king” (RON) or “Potter’s doppelganger (FAWLEY).

But “Cyclist’s alternative” (QUIDDITCH) took her a little time, as did “The spins” (WALTZ).

When she answered a clue wrong, the paper absorbed her ink and disappeared. This gave her some leeway for trial and error with the harder clues, but it still took her ages. Normally *The New York Times* puzzles took her four or five hours. But for this, she had been working on it the entire morning and was only a third of the way through it by lunch.

“This is the maddest thing you’ve ever done,” she told him as she waved the partially-finished crossword puzzle in his face before settling down to eat.

He gave her an unapologetic grin. “Having fun?”

Hermione didn’t answer, but she couldn’t help the small smile that crossed her face. The truth was, she *was* having fun. It was so creative and so personal. His clues didn’t just reference magic, but *her* magic and *his* magic and them together.

The puzzle was funny and so very Draco, that she could practically hear him in her head as she read each clue. She realized it must have taken him days to write it, not to mention all the charms he had done to force her to solve it in order. It truly warmed her heart, and she had thoroughly forgiven him for the fact that he was making her jump through all these ridiculous hoops to get her puzzle piece back.

He saw the look on her face and nodded in satisfaction. “Lunch first, then I’ll leave you to it.”

Hermione ate quickly, eager to get back to her magical crossword, and she ensconced herself in a chair on deck as she worked through the afternoon.

She was reluctantly amused when she got to the clue that read, “Our first child’s godfather - Sorry, I already promised” (THEO).

Then she laughed when she read “The other sticky stuff” (CUM).

They had eaten dinner and the sun was setting as the final few clues appeared.

She melted as she read “My heart (2 wds)” (MON COEUR).

Then she smiled softly when she read, “What you are to me” (DARLING).

Finally, at long last she reached the second to the last clue: “How I feel about you” (LOVE).

With that answer entered, Hermione waited for the final clue to appear. It was for 128 Across. The last blocks of the puzzle were set apart from the others, blocked off on every side by black squares. She would have no other letters to give her a hint for this one, and the word was long with fourteen spaces.

But the clue for 128 Across stayed blank. Instead, some new words appeared directly below it.

Turn me over.

Very curious now, she flipped the paper over to find more writing that hadn't been there earlier.

Third letter of 5 across: Pigeons' greatest fear _____.

Fifth letter of 18 across: Sapphires' reemergence (3 wds) _____.

Third letter of 27 down: My favorite pair _____.

Fifth letter of 34 across: Replacing the bad ones with the good _____.

Third letter of 38 down: Formerly in the custody of goblins _____.

Third letter of 46 down: My experiments _____.

Thirteenth letter of 54 across: The cat's magic _____.

Seventh letter of 68 down: A superior news source (2 wds) _____.

Third letter of 75 across: Spinster's solutions _____.

Second letter of 82 across: An excellent topping for 27 down _____.

Fifth letter of 97 down: Prophets of the Inner Eye _____.

Second letter of 108 down: Erection factor _____.

First letter of 114 across: Pieces of loot _____.

She flipped the paper back and forth and filled in the blanks from the puzzle she had just solved.

Third letter of 5 across: Pigeons' greatest fear PALATE.

Fifth letter of 18 across: Sapphires' reemergence (3 wds) NEW YEARS EVE.

First letter of 27 down: My favorite pair TITS.

Fifth letter of 34 across: Replacing the bad ones with the good DREAMS.

Third letter of 38 down: Formerly in the custody of goblins EMERALDS.

Third letter of 46 down: My experiments POTIONS.

Thirteenth letter of 54 across: The cat's magic TRANSFIGURATION.

Seventh letter of 68 down: A superior news source (2 wds) THE TIMES.

Third letter of 75 across: Spinster's solutions TOYS.

Second letter of 82 across: An excellent topping for 27 down HONEY.

Fifth letter of 97 down: Prophets of the Inner Eye MARAUDERS.

Second letter of 108 down: Erection factor DUEL.

First letter of 114 across: Pieces of loot PUZZLES.

Suddenly thirteen blanks appeared on the bottom of the paper, and she filled them in with the letters referenced above.

LET ME TIE YOU UP

Hermione gasped again as she saw the final missive from the magical crossword appear at the very bottom.

Get naked and go to the bed, pretty girl. You've earned a proper fucking.

She exhaled and felt her center start to get wet as she read the words a second and then a third time. It had been a rather long time since he had done this to her – the last time had been at Hogwarts – and dammit, she *had* earned it. Though technically incomplete, the crossword puzzle had been incredibly fun, but it was also bloody hard. And now she couldn't wait for her reward.

She rose and made her way toward the bedroom. “Draco?” she called as she walked in. He was nowhere to be found. But he had checked on her progress a couple times throughout the day. He would be by soon, no doubt. Hermione took a deep breath and pushed the robe off and stepped out of her knickers. She made her way toward the bed but stopped as she got there. A familiar box was in the middle of it, with a note on top.

Put these on and then lie down spread eagle for me.

She exhaled as she pulled the box toward her and opened it to find the emeralds. She hadn't seen them in well over a month, and here they were again. Something inside of her warmed and settled as she touched them. He hadn't been having second thoughts, then. He hadn't gotten caught up in the wedding when he let her wear them. Everything about that Skeeter article was bollocks. He had held them back after the first week because he wanted to tease her. He wanted to steal her puzzle piece and then send her on an intellectual adventure to earn it back. He had kept the emeralds from her so that her reward for finishing that mad crossword puzzle would be that much sweeter.

Smiling broadly now she lifted out the necklace and clasped it around her neck. Then she took out the earrings and placed one in each ear. She moved the box to her nightstand, and then laid down as she slowly spread her arms and legs out.

She laid there for several minutes wondering when he would arrive when suddenly she was blindfolded in one moment and bound in the next. She gasped in surprise and arched reflexively.

She hadn't seen him. She hadn't heard him. She had no idea where he was. But he must be with her now. Somewhere.

Oh fuck.

Draco

Draco watched his witch under Potter's invisibility cloak as she undressed, read the last note he left her, and smiled broadly.

He mentally exhaled in relief. He had held a few things back for tonight, but Hermione's reaction to the latest Skeeter article made him second guess his plan. He read it too of course, as soon as his mother's owl arrived. He had scoffed at it and hadn't tried to keep it from her because she had seemed unaffected by everything else that bitch had written. But something about that particular article had finally made her crack, and Draco had been forced to give her a nudge so they could get a move on and do this tonight.

Of course she had wanted to kill him when she realized he stole her puzzle piece. He knew he should probably feel bad about it, but he didn't. The events of that night had driven that fucking article from her mind, and he would steal her puzzle pieces a hundred times over if it kept her mind off of Skeeter's words that had hurt her so much. Besides, he loved her reaction to it. He relished how her eyes flashed and her sun-kissed skin reddened. He hadn't been lying when he told her it was foreplay for him. It really turned him on, and he had been hard for the past two days as he waited for her to get here.

And now she was here, and he had been forgiven, thanks to the magical crossword puzzle he had written. He had to admit, it had been really fun for him too, and he had stayed under Potter's invisibility cloak for much of the day watching her reactions as she solved it.

He was especially relieved to discover that she didn't seem completely opposed to the idea of Theo as godfather.

When she finally flipped the paper over, Draco watched for a moment longer until she got close to the end, and then he slipped into the bedroom first to wait. Draco cast a silencing charm before she ever entered the bedroom, and then he watched her undress and find the emeralds before laying down and readying herself for him. He let her stay like that for a few minutes until he carefully moved the tip of his wand out from under the cloak and silently blindfolded and bound her. She gasped and arched and was already quivering for him.

Draco just smirked as he removed the cloak and tucked it away.

He let her lay there for another few minutes while he made his final preparations in the bedroom, and then he undressed himself as he watched her. He approached her slowly, taking in everything: the soft curls, the perfectly pink nipples, her wetness that was becoming more visible as she waited. The emeralds glittered brilliantly on her neck, sparkling with each pant of her breathing, and Draco thought she had never looked more perfect than she did right now: she was here, and she was all his. Every piece of her was claimed by him.

Correction: every piece of her was *about* to be claimed by him.

Theo had let him in on a little secret, you see – or rather, several little secrets — and they had been driving Draco mad for the last few weeks as he bided his time and waited for the perfect moment. He had managed to Savor while he waited, but he had dropped his hands into his pants more than once as he dreamed about this night near the end of their trip.

Draco had added Blaise and Theo's names to the very short list of people who could contact them while they were away. And it was a good thing he did, because a week after their lunch in Venice, Theo had sent the most fascinating letter to Draco, helped along in a few places by Blaise. During his one-on-one time with Hermione, Theo had learned things about her. She had asked him questions, and he had asked her questions in return. They had compared notes. Theo's letter contained many of those notes, or rather, a very interesting list. Theo told him the things Draco had done before that she loved and the things she was curious to try. She had confessed it all to him, submissive to submissive, and Draco couldn't fucking wait for the Joy tonight.

First on Theo's list: "She loves to be tied up."

That was easy enough. Draco had been planning on doing that anyway.

Next on Theo's list: "She loves wearing the emeralds during sex. They make her feel like she's being claimed by you."

Draco had suspected it, but with written confirmation in hand, he had said a wistful, but temporary, goodbye to the emeralds and locked them away. As much as *he* relished seeing her wear them, he resolved to wait until the perfect time to pull them out again.

So far, they were off to a good start, and she was talking to him now, eager to find him and impatient for whatever would come next.

"Draco... please, I know you're there... please..."

Draco said nothing, but moved to the next thing on Theo's list: "Curious about extreme temperatures (proceed with caution mate)."

He moved the small bucket of ice the house elves had put out for him earlier to the nightstand and picked up an ice cube as he rubbed it in his palm to make it start to melt just a bit. He turned to her and then lightly brushed it across one nipple.

She gasped and jerked at the sudden sensation, as her nipples got impossibly hard from the cold. Draco admired his work as she arched.

"Oh God! What...?" she was breathing hard, shocked by the cold. Draco picked up his wand and cast a warming charm on her that Blaise had written down. It was very targeted and came out a shade too hot, and she gasped again.

"Magic..." she breathed. "You're going to do magic?"

Yes, he was going to do magic because it was another thing on Theo's list: "Curious about magic during sex."

Besides, it dovetailed rather well with her curiosity about extreme temperatures.

He didn't answer, but ran the tip of his wand from her necklace down her body, between her breasts until he reached the spot just below her navel. She was shaking, both from nerves and stimulation, as he lifted the wand and pointed it to himself to release the silencing charm.

“I want your cunt so hot you melt this ice,” he said as he moved the ice cube and gently traced her outer folds with it.

She gasped and keened, before he pulled it away and cast another heating charm on her.

“God Draco... I just...” she was breathing heavily. The alternation between cold and hot was driving her mad, he could tell. He brushed the ice cube across the other nipple before moving it to her lower abdomen, and now she was twitching and jerking as her skin broke out into goosebumps.

He moved his wand back to her and touched her with it again, as he tossed the ice cube back into the bucket.

“Is this what you want?” he asked. “You want to be under my wand?”

She was breathing heavily, and nodded, but he said, “*Words*,” sharply, and Hermione swallowed hard.

“Yes.... Yes I want to be under your wand.”

“Why?” he demanded, as he continued to trace her body with his wand tip. “Tell me.”

(Theo’s list: “Likes interrogation.”)

“Because...” she hesitated. “Because it means you could do anything to me... anything at all... it makes you... more powerful than me.”

Now it was Draco’s turn to swallow hard as he tried to force his own raging erection back down.

“What do you want then? What should my wand do to you?”

“I...” she hesitated again, but Draco already knew the answer to this from Theo’s letter. He had read it almost incredulously, not because he wasn’t game but because he was absolutely stunned that Theo had gotten it out of her: “Curious about wand play.”

Draco thought it had been a *very* productive lunch indeed.

Draco realized she couldn’t bring herself to tell him. “You want me to make you come with my wand don’t you?”

She nodded quickly, and then remembered herself. “Yes,” she said, and she was practically quivering now in anticipation.

“Very well. There are two ways of course. This way,” and he flicked his wand at her as he thought of the nonverbal incantation for the spell Blaise had contributed. Immediately Hermione broke, and Draco watched with some surprise as she started to orgasm for him, moaning and shaking before the sensation passed. Draco just blinked, in slight disbelief that the spell worked so well. He filed that away for later. She was trembling now as she waited to see what he would do next.

“And there’s another way too...” Draco said as he traced the tip of his wand from her stomach down over her mound. “And I know you want it. I know you’ve fantasized about it. You want to polish my wand, pretty girl. And you want to do it literally.”

He dipped the tip of his wand inside of her for a moment, and she gave a strangled cry at the feeling of the wood penetrating her. But Draco quickly determined it was far too thin to *really* stimulate her so he pulled it out again and used it to press down on her clit instead.

She gasped and started to tremble, as Draco held it there for several long moments before he finally released her while she was panting.

“Tell me, princess. Who owns your tits?”

(Theo’s list: “Fantasizes about verbal domination.”)

“You,” she breathed.

“And who owns your cunt?”

“You,” she gasped.

“And who owns that pretty mouth with your hot tongue?”

“Just you,” she said.

“So when I tell you to get wet, what do you do?”

“I get wet.”

“And when I tell you to arch for me so I can see your tits, what do you do?”

“I arch,” and she did, as if to prove her point.

“And when I tell you to suck me dry, what do you do?”

“I open up and say *please*,” she moaned, and then she opened her mouth and panted, as though inviting him in.

Holy fucking mother of Merlin.

Draco couldn’t say no to that. He climbed onto the bed and straddled her face as he lowered his cock into her mouth.

She groaned in satisfaction as he pumped himself slowly into her.

“That’s right,” he gasped. “You’re all mine. Your sex is mine. Your body is mine. You’re fucking mine. And you will never, *ever* be anybody else’s, do you understand me?”

She made a strangled noise, which Draco interpreted as “yes,” since his cock was halfway down her throat, and she really couldn’t talk.

“Good girl,” he said, and then he grabbed his wand and flicked it toward her, giving her another magical orgasm as a reward.

She broke again, and Draco felt her orgasm through her mouth and halfway down his shaft.

Fucking hell.

He felt himself getting perilously close, and he pulled out of her mouth. She was gasping and flushed, her chest heaving with the effort.

He moved off of her to give both of them a small break. He wasn’t done yet, and he needed her to stay present for him just a little longer.

He moved to one side and stroked her with the palm of one hand, running it all over her body.

“That was so good, mon coeur. You’re so beautiful like this. So perfect.”

(Theo’s list: “Praise kink and pet name kink.”)

(Draco was well aware, thank you very much.)

She sighed and presented, just as she always did when he said these things to her and touched her like this.

“Now darling,” he said as he continued to run his hand over her body before pinching her nipples. She started to quiver again, and he smiled. “Let’s revisit a question I asked you months ago.”

“Alright,” she breathed, as she pressed her chest into his palms harder.

“How many points of entry do you have?”

“Three,” she said.

“That’s right. Three. And how many of them has my cock been in tonight?”

“Just one,” she groaned.

“Good. I just wanted to make sure we’re keeping count. Now then, you’ve been very lovely and good for me, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” she said.

“And remind me, darling. When you’re like this, who is in control?”

“You,” she breathed.

“And what will you give me?”

“Anything,” she groaned. “Anything at all.”

Draco felt that familiar possessiveness creep through him as he picked up an ice cube again and approached the bed.

“Good. Then I want you to give me my dessert.”

Then he lowered his head to her cunt and began to feast.

Immediately she jerked at the unexpected feeling of his mouth on her core after being ignored for so long, but Draco held her down with one hand and gave it to her hard. She started to moan and writhe, and then Draco moved his hand with the ice cube to run it over her nipples, and she gave a strangled cry and an almighty jerk at the contact before Draco felt a large gush come out of her. He lapped it right up.

Fuck, but she was perfect.

She was trembling now, and he sensed she was starting to move from stimulated to over stimulated. This was exactly how he wanted her, but he wanted to control the timing. He wanted her to fly to that special place at exactly the right moment.

He threw the ice cube back in the bucket and then moved up to lavish her breasts with his tongue. Despite the teasing and the new things and the wish list she had confessed to Theo, he could never have her like this and not suck on her nipples at least once. Besides, he knew she liked it. Theo had confirmed it for him.

“What did I tell you at the end of the crossword puzzle?” he asked, after he had finally gotten his fill.

“You...” she started, and Draco could tell she was a bit dazed. “You said... I earned a... fucking.”

“And I have given that to you yet?”

“No.... but....” she sighed and groaned as he gave one nipple another gentle bite. “I liked it anyway.”

Gods but she was so sweet and honest like this. Draco couldn’t resist. He moved to her lips and gave her a kiss. She opened for him immediately, and he kissed her deeply for a moment before pulling away and readying himself.

“Thank you for telling me the truth mon coeur,” he said. “But you *did* earn a fucking. And I need to keep up my end of the bargain.”

As he said the final word, he slotted into her, and they both groaned.

“Now,” he said as he started to move. “How many points of entry has my cock been in tonight?”

“Two,” she breathed.

“Good girl,” he said. “And I’m going to get you really good just like this in a moment, but I want to know. Can we make it all three tonight? When I’m done here, can I fuck your arse?”

Draco waited with bated breath. This had been the thing, more than anything that had driven him mad for the past few weeks as he contemplated it. He had been preparing her, readying her, stretching her with his fingers, and then Theo sent his letter, which ended with, “She’s ready for you to bugger her for real mate.”

Draco had dreamed about it so much. He wanted it so badly. They were both virgins in a way, and he wanted to lose it with her, tonight.

As he read through Theo’s entire list he briefly considered just doing it. He had started doing it spontaneously with his hands a while ago, and she didn’t mind it. But this felt more personal than anything else, and his cock was bigger than anything she’d had in her before. He had to ask. He couldn’t just take it on faith.

“What do you say, love?” he asked.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, I wanted... was hoping...”

Triumph collided with eagerness, and he rewarded her honesty by going deep and hard. He *did* want to get her like this first. And now he wanted her to go as quickly as possible so he could have her the last way too.

“Fucking come for me,” he ground out. “Come hard, all around me.”

She was getting close, so Draco picked up his secret weapon from the nightstand and turned it on.

(Theo’s list: “She raves about her vibrator. I’m going to make Blaise buy me one.”)

And the sound of buzzing she gasped, but Draco didn’t tease or hesitate as he pressed it down onto her clit. As he finally did it, she convulsed yet again, and Draco pushed her further toward that special place. After a few moments, he pulled out, but didn’t remove the vibrator just yet as he cast the cleansing spell and then threw his wand aside. She was shaking again, and he let her do it. He wanted the next time she came to end her, so he kept it on her as he dipped his fingers into some lube and rubbed it on his cock.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, Savoring again as he hardly dared to believe he was finally getting to do this. He put the vibrator aside and turned it off for just a moment, as he stared down at his witch, quivering with aftershocks and one good orgasm away from being totally gone.

One is all I need, he thought, and he lifted her hips slightly and found that special place, just a shade lower than her cunt.

He nearly came as he pushed inside of her. It was so tight and hot, and she moaned at the feeling.

"Fuck..." he groaned. He felt like he was being transported back in time to the first night he had sex with Hermione on New Year's Eve. He had nearly lost himself that time too, but he had just managed to hold it together.

This though, this might truly be his undoing. He gritted his teeth and bit his lip as he pushed in a bit further, and then exhaled and breathed as he adjusted to the feeling of it. He could see she was trying to do the same thing, now full in a way she had never been before.

Draco just had to fill her other parts too.

"You're taking me in like this so good," he said. "But I think you can take more."

With this he picked up the vibrator again and shifted slightly so he could slip it inside of her. She groaned at the feeling of being completely full now. He turned it on and felt her jerk hard with another moan, and he himself nearly came at the sensation that he felt through her thin walls dividing her two channels.

"Open up," he ground out, and automatically her jaw dropped, and Draco slipped the fingers of his free hand inside, and she instinctively began to suck.

The coordination to manage all three points of entry was truly a challenge, but Draco was determined to do it. Besides, it gave him something to think about, other than the delicious feeling of his cock in her arse. But as he began to move both the vibrator and his cock, that feeling suddenly rushed back, and he felt himself getting closer and closer.

"Gods, Hermione, I need you to come," he gasped. He was moments away from being done himself, and he needed her to go first, just one last time. He couldn't hold it much longer, but he gritted his teeth and focused. Finally, blessedly, he felt her come apart with a shout, and Draco didn't wait any longer. He pumped himself into her, as gently as he could, before finally pulling out his fingers, then the vibrator, and then lastly his cock.

He rolled next to her and just tried to breathe for a minute.

Fuck, that had been... everything. Just everything.

He raised his head to stare at her, and she was limp. He was sure he had gotten her there again. He had done it.

(Theo's list: "Thinks subspace is the greatest fucking place to be. She's absolutely right.")

He slowly moved up toward her and took the blindfold off, then raised his wand to vanish her bindings and their mess. She was still laying there, unmoving, except for tiny aftershocks.

"Hermione?" he said. No response.

"Hermione?" he asked again, a bit louder.

He touched one nipple, and she convulsed.

Perfect.

He had gotten her there. He had timed it just right. He Savored her like this, and Joy was flooding him as he thought about what they had just done.

He started giving her a light massage to bring the blood flow back to her extremities. After several long minutes she finally groaned, though she didn't open her eyes

He stared at his beautiful girl. She was so sated like this, so lovely. He could scarcely believe they had fulfilled each other's fantasies tonight. But they had, and it had been perfect.

He rubbed and stroked and kissed and loved until finally, at long last he heard the best sound in the world. It was the sound of her voice.

“Draco?”

Chapter 29: Savor

Hermione

Hermione slowly, languidly found herself coming back from that very special place. She could feel the familiar massage Draco always gave her after one of these rounds, and she sighed as she reemerged.

“Draco?” she asked.

He didn’t say anything, he just continued to rub.

After a long while she opened her eyes to find him staring down at her intently, a small smile on his face.

“Am I forgiven then?”

She couldn’t help the smile that crossed her face too. “Oh, I suppose so, but I think your crossword puzzle malfunctioned at the very end. The clue for 128 Across never did appear.”

He wrinkled his nose at this. “Damn. I’ll have to check the spellwork on it. But you got very close to finishing it, *mon coeur*. I’d still say you earned it.”

“Does that mean I can finally have my puzzle piece back then?”

“Ah, as to that, I’m still reserving judgment.”

Hermione just rolled her eyes at this and nestled in. She was utterly exhausted and couldn’t bring herself to care. Or move. Or do much of anything until...

“Oh bugger,” she muttered as the familiar lump in her throat rose.

“It’s fine,” he said, as he traced patterns on her back.

She waited for it to pass before she looked up at him a bit shyly. “So we... you did...”

“Yes,” he said. He looked more satisfied than Hermione could ever remember.

She just exhaled and nodded.

“Good?” he asked.

She nodded again.

He gave her a look. “Okay *fine*. Yes, it was good.”

He chuckled and pulled her in close. "I like it when you use your words."

"I know," she whispered.

They stayed that way for a long while until Hermione eventually stirred. "We should get ready for bed. We're still going to Tarragona tomorrow, right?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, Tarragona tomorrow and then we'll be in Barcelona for three days before we head back."

"It's been a dream," she said. "I can't believe it's so close to the end."

"We can do this every summer if you like," he said.

She smiled broadly. "I would love that. And now... bed, if we're going to have the energy for ruins tomorrow."

"Right you are, love," he said. "You can go first."

She nodded and eased herself out of bed, feeling deliciously sore. She slipped on some underwear and a tank top, brushed her teeth, and then stared at herself in the mirror for a moment, running one finger along the necklace.

She smiled a little before reaching behind her to unclasp it. She removed the earrings too, then she walked back into the bedroom to put them away in their case.

"Do you want to put these back in the safe?" she asked, as she pulled the case toward her.

"I will in a minute," he said.

She nodded and opened the case and then paused. There was a piece of paper inside. She lifted it out slowly and unfolded it to read.

To finish the unfinished, we follow certain paths: life before death, seed before fruit, friendship before love. I've finally learned to find Joy in the journey and Savor it, because the path from one thing to the next is unpredictable. We can only see the end when we view it through a window of passion, that thing that resurrects the determination inside of us to truly find what we are seeking, even when the route becomes indirect. As somebody once said, 'The straight line belongs to man. The curved line belongs to God.' Your lovely curves have certainly made a believer out of me, darling.

She furrowed her brow as she read it a second time and then lifted her head to find Draco watching her with a small smile on his face.

"What on earth does this mean?" she finally asked.

“As if I would ever tell you that.”

She scowled a bit, and he just laughed as he rolled out of bed and then walked over to her. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out eventually.”

He dropped a kiss on her head and then made his way to the loo, leaving Hermione studying the note, suddenly wide awake.

There was something truly unique about sitting in an ancient Roman amphitheater and looking at the ocean while you did it. If Hermione listened closely, she could even hear the waves from one side. But despite the dramatic views and balmy sea air, Hermione could only think of one thing: there was not a book of quotations on board their yacht.

Hermione had laid awake for a couple of hours the previous night, turning the clue over and over again in her mind. There were two things that really stuck out at her: the opening phrase “to finish the unfinished” and the quote at the end.

The first thing told her she had to solve this last riddle to finally finish her blasted jigsaw puzzle, and until she did, it would remain unfinished. The second thing was the only concrete clue he had given her. She was nearly certain of it.

Something about the quote niggled her brain, but she couldn’t place her finger on it. She didn’t think she had heard it before, but it still seemed familiar somehow: it was as though the person who said it was somebody she *should* know.

After Draco fell asleep that night she lit her wand and scoured the bookshelf for a book of quotations. She found nothing. She checked again the next morning to make sure she hadn’t missed it in the dark and still found nothing. She even called one of the yacht elves to confirm that there was no such book on board, and the tiny elf squeaked that he had never seen such a thing Miss.

Once in Tarragona, Hermione eyed a couple of bookshops and internet cafes with interest, but Draco caught her look each time. “Don’t even think about it, darling. That’s cheating.”

Hermione wasn’t sure if she agreed with this statement, but now that he had evidently created a rule against it, she knew she wouldn’t look it up the easy way. He seemed to think she would be able to solve it without a book of quotations to help or some instant answer from the internet. He had thrown down the gauntlet as it were, and Hermione *certainly* wouldn’t cheat at the very end. She would find a way to solve it. She just wasn’t sure how.

The day in Tarragona passed with no other revelations, and they slept outside that night as they sailed north toward Barcelona and their final destination.

Neither Hermione nor Draco really knew what to expect from Barcelona. It was a major port city of course, and their boat was scheduled to dock there so they decided to allot a few days to it. But unlike most of the other places they had visited on their trip, the pictures in the guidebook didn't look terribly charming. It was clearly an urban area, but also beachy. It had an old town, but also a great deal of modern architecture, some of which was totally bizarre. It certainly intrigued them, but it was so different than anything else they had visited they weren't sure if they would like it. Still, they were turning in their boat there, so they decided to give it a chance. And Hermione had created a backup plan for their last couple of days there if it wasn't their thing.

They stepped off the dock and apparated to the apparition point closest to Las Ramblas and immediately lost themselves in the crowd.

It was color and heat and bodies, all pressing together to get food from stalls, listen to street musicians, and swipe at the occasional pickpocket. It was incredibly touristy, but also amazing, and Hermione and Draco were instantly hooked.

"We're staying here," she said. "Maybe we'll see Montserrat on our last day if we have time, but this is amazing."

Draco just smiled at her and nodded, as he held her hand tightly so they wouldn't get separated in the crowd.

They made their way to the Gothic quarter, starting with something they were sure they would like. They spent the morning wandering the cobblestone streets and visiting Santa Maria della Mar before braving Las Ramblas again and heading to the Boqueria Market for lunch. Here they found a hundred things to eat, some cooked, some not. It was a feast for the senses, and they sat on a curb as they sampled the Catalan flavors.

It was such a nice day they apparated to the Parc Guell, where they encountered Antoni Gaudi, Barcelona's most famous architect, for the first time.

"Holy shit, what is this place?" asked Draco in disbelief as he stared at the odd houses, the colorful mosaics, and inexplicably, a large mosaic lizard in three dimensions. "This is the weirdest place I've ever been. But it's kind of amazing too, isn't it?"

Hermione agreed, and they spent a couple hours there before deciding their first taste of Gaudi wasn't enough. They next visited the Casa Battlo, one of the most unique buildings either one of them had ever entered. The exterior looked almost alive with undulating stone, colorful mosaics, and stained glass windows. The interior was similarly incredible, and both of them gaped as they walked through it.

It was only as Hermione was looking around the ballroom, which had a ceiling carved to look like an enormous swirl that she gasped and turned to Draco with huge eyes.

"'The straight line belongs to man. The curved line belongs to God.' Gaudi said it, didn't he? There's not a straight line in this place, nor in Parc Guell! It's all curves!"

Draco grinned broadly at her. "A hundred points for Gryffindor," he said.

Hermione furrowed her brow. “Okay so Gaudi said it... but...”

Then her eyes got big again. “Bloody hell, do I have to search every Gaudi building in Barcelona to find my sodding puzzle piece? There are a half dozen I can think of off the top of my head!”

Draco chuckled and tapped her nose again.

“Think on it darling. You’ve made a lot of progress today.”

Hermione huffed, but tried to relish the small victory. She had figured out the quotation, though she had to admit it didn’t help her as much as she thought it would.

They resolved to stay in Barcelona the following day, and now Hermione was determined to visit every other Gaudi site they had missed. When she got back onto the boat she pulled out her guidebook, and her job dropped.

“There are twenty Gaudi sites, Draco! Twenty! Where the hell did you hide it? And I’d also like to know *how* you hid it, seeing as how I’ve been with you the entire time!”

He just chuckled. “If you figure it out, I’ll tell you everything.”

Hermione huffed again, but looked at her guidebook more closely and made the list of the top contenders: Palau Guell, La Sagrada Familia, Casa Mila, and Teresians’ Covenant College.

“Most of the others are minor sites. But I have no idea how I’m supposed to search these, Draco. And we might have to go back to Parc Guell or Casa Battlo too because I only realized it at the very end.”

He just smiled mysteriously and sipped his wine.

At Hermione’s insistence they started at Casa Mila, because it was the curviest of them all. But she had to admit as she walked around it, something about it didn’t feel quite right, and she wasn’t sure how she was supposed to search for the blasted puzzle piece anyway when she was being carefully shepherded from room to room.

She was quiet at lunch and pulled out her clue again, which she had brought with her today.

To finish the unfinished, we follow certain paths: life before death, seed before fruit, friendship before love. I’ve finally learned to find Joy in the journey and Savor it, because the path from one thing to the next is unpredictable. We can only see the end when we view it through a window of passion, that thing that resurrects the determination inside of us to truly find what we are seeking, even when the route becomes indirect. As somebody once said, ‘The straight line belongs to man. The curved line belongs to God.’ Your lovely curves have certainly made a believer out of me, darling.

Now something else was niggling at her.

Finish the unfinished.

Resurrects.

God.

Believer.

“It’s La Sagrada Familia, isn’t it?” she asked quietly. “It’s the church Gaudi never finished. They’ve been building it for over a hundred years, and it’s still not done. It’s had an... indirect path to completion. Lots of false starts.”

Draco smiled broadly at her. “Precisely darling.”

Hermione felt a rush of pride and then a larger moment of frustration. “But Draco, how am I supposed to find a puzzle piece in a bloody *church*?”

“Let’s go there after lunch, and we’ll see.”

Hermione practically inhaled her food, as Draco laughed at her a little, but soon they were making their way toward Gaudi’s greatest masterpiece, though still a work in progress.

“My God,” she breathed, as she walked through the doors.

Hermione didn’t believe in God, not really. Or maybe she did a little, after the things Harry told her about meeting Dumbledore in between life and death. She wasn’t entirely sure. But she had always been an academic, a skeptic. She enjoyed visiting churches for their beauty, their majesty, their history. She didn’t seek them out for her own spirituality.

But as she walked around La Sagrada Familia for the first time, she thought that this might be the closest she had ever gotten to becoming a true believer.

It was enormous. It was colorful. It was modern. It was holy. It was unlike anything she had ever seen before, not even the other Gaudi buildings from the past couple of days.

“This is... this is...” she said weakly.

Tears pricked her eyes. She was having an emotional response to what she was seeing, and it wasn’t even done yet. There was unsightly scaffolding in places and far too many tourists. But she could see what it was *supposed* to become when it completed its journey. She could *really* see it. She vowed to return when it was finished, if it ever happened in her lifetime.

Draco was silent beside her, seemingly speechless as he looked at it too.

This reaction struck her as odd. “You must have been here before. Since you hid my puzzle piece here.”

He looked at her and shrugged. “I used a portkey to come in the middle of the night. I didn’t see it clearly.”

Hermione supposed that made sense. And she could see the truth on his face as he took it all in. He had never seen it before, not really. He was having an emotional response too.

Hermione lost track of time as she wandered through the nave and then outside to see the towers that were still unfinished. She had tried a general summoning charm to find her puzzle piece but of course that hadn’t worked.

“Give me a little credit darling,” Draco said with a wry look. “I thought of that.”

But the church was huge, and it was under construction. There were many sections closed off to the public that a wizard under the cover of night would be able to access.

Where the hell was it?

She was starting to lose hope when she heard a tour group behind her.

“... can see the Nativity side and the Passion side. The Nativity windows of course are themed in blue and green. The Passion windows are red, orange, and yellow.”

Hermione whipped around to stare at the tour guide and then dove into her bag to pull out the clue.

We can only reach the end when we view it through a window of passion...

“Draco!” she cried. “Window of passion! They’re the Passion windows!” she exclaimed pointing to the red, orange, and yellow windows on one side of the basilica.

He smiled at this a little. “You’re getting warmer.”

“But which one...?”

The entire side of the basilica was covered in them, and they were far too high to search. She dug into her bag to pull out her binoculars and started to scan them.

“Nothing...” she muttered. “But it *has* to be the Passion windows.... Or one of them at any rate...”

She looked down at the clue again and read the next part.

... that thing that resurrects the determination inside of us...

Passion and Resurrection. “But the Passion *is* the Resurrection, isn’t it? Or I suppose the Passion actually comes *before* the Resurrection in the story...”

She turned slowly until her eyes finally landed on a window that was a little different than the others and set off from them at the end. It was still in shades of red and yellow, but it was less abstract. It almost looked like there was a vague depiction of a *something* rising from the bottom of it.

She held her breath as she slowly brought her binoculars to her eyes and scanned the window. If she knew Draco, it would be...

"There," she breathed, her face splitting into a wide grin. "It's there, my puzzle piece with the cross on it, right in the middle of the window."

"It's the Resurrection window," said Draco softly as he came up behind her. "It was actually the first window installed in the basilica. I read about it in one of your guidebooks, and I noticed it was missing a cross. I thought it could use one."

Hermione snorted at this and then she started to laugh, and soon she was clutching her sides as Draco grinned beside her. Several people around them looked at her like she had lost her mind.

Finally she calmed and brushed some tears from her eyes and she stood again. "So how am I supposed to get to it? Seeing as how I can't summon it."

"Let me give you an assist," he said, as he pulled her toward an empty corner and pulled something out of his bag. Hermione immediately recognized Harry's invisibility cloak. And then he reached in for something else, something miniature, and he discretely tapped his wand to it. It quickly expanded to become...

"Your *broom*?" she hissed. "I have to fly your bloody broom up to the window?"

He gave her an unapologetic smile. "The cloak will cover you."

"I don't fly," she insisted.

Draco gave her a skeptical look. "According to your best pal Potter, you do. He's even gotten you to play quidditch before. And my broom is excellent. It's only a few stories up."

Hermione huffed, but she had come this far. "Fine," she said, grabbing his broom and throwing the cloak over her at the same time. Draco grinned as he stepped back, and Hermione kicked off, vowing to go slow and steady to get her puzzle piece. Slow and steady. And she wouldn't look down, she *wouldn't*.

"Bloody hell."

Draco

Draco watched as his girlfriend disappeared under the cloak, and a moment later he heard her kick off with a muttered, "Bloody hell."

That was Draco's signal. He turned and fled through the door right next to them that was mercifully a gentleman's loo and lost his lunch in one of the urinals.

"Are you okay?" asked a concerned tourist with an American accent. Draco just wiped his mouth and gave him a weak thumbs up as he flushed.

With that milestone behind him, Draco rinsed his mouth out in the sink, took a deep breath, and slipped back out into the nave of the church. He pulled Hermione's binoculars out of her bag and trained them up to the window, and sure enough he saw a small hand appear from thin air, along with the tip of a wand, and he watched as she removed the sticking charm he had used to adhere the puzzle piece to the window weeks ago.

At that moment, he felt a buzz in his pocket, and he quickly turned around to pull out the muggle cell phone Healer Robinson had helped him acquire before leaving Hogwarts.

As Draco put his plan together, he had requested some special sessions with Healer Robinson. It had resulted in a few trips to an internet cafe in London to teach Draco the fundamentals of a computer and email, as well as the basic functions of a cellular phone.

This, of course, was the *other* reason he had selected their specific yacht. It was one of the few he could pick from that had muggle power outlets in one section of it, far away from where the house elves worked to prepare meals and do laundry. It meant that large sections of their yacht were unwarded, so they had to be more cautious about things like theft. But they had disappeared into the muggle world for this trip, and Astoria was in custody. Draco thought they would be safe enough on board, and it meant he could plug in his cell phone to charge it at night when Hermione was asleep.

During their trip he had snuck off the ship at night a few times to check his email and swap out SIM cards for whatever country they happened to be in. This wasn't the first time his phone had buzzed like this.

He saw he had a text message.

Landed.

A broad grin broke out over Draco's face. He couldn't believe it. He *really* couldn't believe it. He sent a text back and then slipped the phone into his pocket and turned around just as he heard Hermione arrive behind him.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing," he said. "Did you get it then?"

This seemed to distract her, and she held the puzzle piece aloft in triumph. "Yes!"

Draco just laughed with her and gave her a big hug. "You did it, love. I knew you could."

“I can’t believe you made me jump through all those hoops,” she said. Draco could tell she was trying to sound annoyed with him, but she was smiling broadly and rather ruining the effect.

“Just something to entertain you,” he said lightly. “Now then, I think we have time for one more thing before we head back. Maybe the Hospital Sant Pau?”

Hermione nodded agreeably, and she put the puzzle piece into her bag and then tapped her wand to seal it. “I don’t trust you not to steal it from me again,” she said.

“Fair enough, I probably deserved that,” said Draco, laughing a little as they made their way out of the church and toward their final destination for the day.

The hospital was beautiful and rather Gaudi-esque, though not to the same degree. Hermione was clearly taken by it, and Draco thought he would be too if he wasn’t so distracted. Still, he felt rather proud of himself that he had managed to Savor everything else up to this point.

After an hour or so, Draco couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Hermione, we’ll have all day tomorrow. But tonight’s our last night on board the boat, and I think the elves are planning a little going away dinner for us. We should head back.”

She agreed to this, and he held her hand as they apparated back to the dock. They made their way on board and were greeted with a beautiful spread of food, just as Draco had requested.

“Ooooh!” said Hermione in delight, and to Draco’s relief she dropped her bag in one of the lounge chairs and immediately made her way to the table.

One of the elves suddenly appeared, catching Hermione by surprise, but he simply bowed and said, “We are thanking Sir and Miss for being such excellent guests these past weeks! Please enjoy!”

Hermione seemed gratified by this, and Draco helped her to her chair. But as soon as her back was turned, he caught the elf’s eye and gave him a small nod. The elf gave a toothy grin and then disappeared below deck.

They ate and they drank their way through several courses, revisiting their grand adventure and arguing with each other about the best thing they had done.

“La Sagrada Familia, I think,” said Hermione. “It was just amazing.”

“Tying you up and bugging you,” said Draco. “Obviously.”

Finally, night had fallen, and they both rose.

“Time to finish my puzzle,” said Hermione with a grin.

Draco gave her a small smile back and nodded, but his heart was pounding out of his chest.

He grabbed her hand and led her toward their bedroom, where the puzzle had lived for all of these weeks.

He stepped back and let her open the door, and she gasped and spun around to stare at him as soon as she saw it. Just like that night on Valentine's Day, the room was filled with ranunculus of every color. Candles had been lit strategically. The piano had been charmed to play very softly in the corner, and there was a bottle of her favorite champagne chilling on the counter, along with some chocolate mousse.

"Draco..." she whispered, and Draco looked in her eyes and was sure she knew now. Somehow she hadn't figured it out until this very moment. He had been nervous every time he thought about this for the last few weeks, but now that they were here his nerves finally melted away. He knew what her answer would be.

Draco started to Savor.

"Why don't you finish your jigsaw puzzle?" he said softly.

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. She tapped her wand against her bag to release the spell on it and reached in to find the last puzzle piece. She looked at it and hesitated a moment before she finally walked over to her puzzle and put it in place.

The moment she did, Draco watched as it shimmered and transformed into a small black box. He heard Hermione choke back a little sob as she reached forward with trembling hands and opened it. There, inside of it, was a small scrap of paper.

128 Across: A very important question (4 wds)

She turned to look at him, and he could see tears starting in her eyes. He took a deep breath and walked toward her. "Why don't I help you with this last one?" he said as he lowered himself to one knee and grabbed her hands.

Hermione let out another small sob, but he could see she was beaming.

"Hermione, I love you more than anything. I know that sometimes it's felt too fast. Other times it's felt too slow. But I've learned to love the imperfections and find joy in all of it because we're doing it together. I want to finish this first journey and start another one with you, darling. Please. Will you marry me?"

Hermione was nodding hard before he ever got to the last words and finally managed to choke out a "Yes!" as Draco rose to kiss her deeply. He was smiling so hard he thought his face might split in two.

"Now," he said, as he pulled back for a moment. "Why don't you finish your crossword too?"

He walked to his nightstand and pulled out the crossword puzzle he had written for her and a pen. He walked back toward her, and she smiled as she took it from him and wrote WILL YOU MARRY ME on 128 Across.

She gasped as the crossword puzzle sparkled for a moment and then disappeared, leaving behind her ring.

“Ooooh...” she said softly as she picked it up and then looked at Draco open-mouthed.

It was a rather unique design, with five stones across the middle of the band, the one in the center a bit larger and set up higher than the others. The two on each side were slightly smaller and sunken in. They were all suspended between two thin bands of tiny diamonds that circled the finger entirely. Draco picked it up and placed it on her finger, and it automatically sized itself to her.

“It’s... I just... Oh my God, this just happened didn’t it?” she said.

Draco smiled down at her. “Yes it did, darling. You finally finished a jigsaw puzzle.”

Hermione

That night and the next day passed as if in a dream. They toasted each other with champagne and mousse before making slow love and falling asleep in each other’s arms. The next morning they enjoyed a truly decadent farewell breakfast on board while they wrote notes to Narcissa, Theo and Blaise, Harry and Ginny, and even Healer Robinson to let them know of their news. Draco explained that quite a few people had been in on his plans and Narcissa had, in fact, scheduled a soiree for the last Saturday in August in anticipation that Draco would actually propose.

“She didn’t call it an engagement party in the invitations, but she knew I was going to do it,” he said. “Invitations went out a few weeks ago, and it’s going to be a full house. I’d like to announce our engagement that night if it’s alright with you.”

Hermione was in full agreement with this plan and had no problem keeping it just to themselves and their closest friends for the next week. Now that they actually *were* engaged, all of the poison had been removed from Rita Skeeter’s pen.

“Luna’s going to be there,” added Draco. “So is Dennis Creevey. Mother has banned all other press because they’ve been so rude about you. We’re going to give the story to *The Quibbler* first. Between the Potter wedding and our engagement, Luna says she and her father will be able to take an expedition to hunt Crumple-Horned Snorcsacks this fall.”

Hermione was pleased and immediately started to consider the edited version of his proposal that she would give to Luna.

I can probably tell her everything except for the bondage, Hermione thought. I’ll give Ginny the full story though. Theo too.

They spent the morning on board until they finally disembarked for the last time. With half the day behind them they decided to visit Montserrat on their final afternoon, which was a Benedictine monastery on top of a mountain nearby. They apparated to the bottom of the mountain and took the funicular to the very top and spent several hours enjoying the views.

When they finally called it and headed back to the bottom, Hermione turned to Draco. "Back to England then?" she asked with a small sigh.

"Dinner first," he said. "I made reservations at a nice restaurant in Barcelona. The elves said we could come back on board for a few minutes to change. Their next clients won't be there until tomorrow morning."

Pleasantly surprised by this, they both apparated back to the yacht and freshened up quickly. Hermione saw the boat was already being prepped for the next guests, and all of their luggage had been sent on to England except for clothes for the final night. She found a dress she didn't recognize, and Draco asked her to wear the emerald earrings.

"The necklace is overkill, but wear the earrings for me, love. We're celebrating our engagement. It's a nice place."

She just smiled and decided to indulge him as they left the boat for what was *really* the last time, and then Draco grabbed her hand and apparated to the Mandarin Oriental. To her surprise he led her inside and toward one of the nicer restaurants just off the lobby.

"Reservations are under Malfoy," he said to the *maitre'd*, who nodded smartly.

"Excellent sir. Your guests have already been seated," he said, as he began to lead them to a table.

"Guests?" asked Hermione in confusion. "Who are we meeting?"

"You'll see," said Draco. For some reason he looked rather nervous, but he had a determined look on his face as they followed the *maitre'd* to the very back. As they approached, Hermione caught the eye of a familiar man and woman seated at a table for four, and she came to a complete halt as her jaw dropped.

Draco felt her stop and turned to look at her. He made some gestures to the *maitre'd* who walked away, but Hermione didn't notice. She was staring at her parents, who were looking back at her with soft smiles on their faces as they stood and walked toward her slowly.

"Hermione?" said her mother.

Hermione felt a sob well up, and suddenly she was moving toward them, and she found herself being buried in a hug from her mother on one side and her father on the other.

After a long while she pulled away, wiping tears from her eyes and staring between her parents and Draco, who had a satisfied look on his face.

"How?" was all she said, as she looked at him.

He shrugged. "Mind healing. Healer Robinson helped me work it out. He was sure that you would still be in their subconscious. You could never *really* erase yourself from them completely. We just had to find a way to draw the subconscious forward and focus it on you. So I started making some tweaks to my dream potion, and I finished it right around Easter. You told me about their diving school on our trip, and I was able to find them in Melbourne and explain everything. They've been taking the potion ever since. It works a bit like polyjuice, actually. I modified it and placed bits of your hair in it so they would have dreams about *you*. They can't control which dreams pop up, but they've been dreaming about you every night since the spring. I've been back a few times with photographs and other things that Potter has collected for me. I didn't tell you about it because I wasn't sure how long it would take or if it would even work at all. I didn't want to get your hopes up."

Hermione beamed at him. "It's okay... you were right. I would have been so worried if I thought there was a chance, but this... it's perfect Draco."

He gave her a relieved smile.

Then she turned to her parents. "So you remember? You remember everything?"

"Most things," said her father. "A lot of things. We're still taking the potion every night, and every once in a while we get a new dream. But in the last month most of our dreams have started to repeat."

"I'm so sorry," she said suddenly. "I'm so sorry I did that to you, and..."

"Shhh," said her mother. "I won't lie, your father and I were shocked at first. But we understand why you did it. Draco has explained quite a bit to us, and he's given us some books and articles to read. We know you're famous, darling. You're famous because you did the right thing when you helped Harry win that war. You couldn't be in two places at once, and it was the best way to protect us. We understand that."

Hermione felt completely overwhelmed, but she just hugged her parents again before they moved to the table to sit.

"Now Hermione," said her father, whose eyes were twinkling now. "I have to ask. Do you two have some news to tell us?"

"Oh!" she said, turning to Draco, who was smiling at her. "Yes! Draco proposed last night, and... well, we're engaged!"

Both of her parents looked very pleased at this, and her mother was admiring the ring when her father spoke up. "Your young man asked for my permission, if you can believe it. A couple months ago he showed up in Melbourne looking like a nervous wreck and asked if he could marry you once the time was right."

Hermione spun around to look at Draco, and he just gave her a small smile. "I'm a bit traditional about some things. I went to see them right before Potter's wedding, and your dad said I could ask you. I waited until the end of the trip to propose so we could celebrate with them. I wanted to give them as much time as possible to remember you first."

Hermione felt her heart swelling at this. She finally understood why he had waited and bided his time and savored what they were doing instead of rushing to the finish line. It really *was* a journey. And he had wanted to include her parents in it.

“Speaking of engagements, Draco texted us this morning to tell us we’re invited to a party at his home next weekend,” said her mother. “I assume it’s your engagement party, yes? The timing couldn’t be better. We’ll be heading to England tomorrow morning and staying for a week until you go back to Hogwarts.”

This news was almost as amazing as the fact that Draco had found her parents and helped restore some of their memories.

“He *texted* you?”

“I have a cell phone, love,” he said, pulling it out of his pocket.

Hermione just gaped, and they all laughed at the expression on her face.

“You’re welcome to stay at the Manor or you can stay at your old home,” said Draco, now addressing her parents. “Harry Potter bought it from you a couple years ago and still has it. There are muggle repelling wards on it, but we can drop them easily enough if you want to stay there. I’ve already taken all of the muggle repelling wards off of the Manor.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Good Lord. Can you imagine? The poor muggles in Wiltshire just discovered a brand new, ancient estate that popped up out of nowhere.”

They all laughed at this, before her father said, “We’ll stay at our former home. I think it will help us remember. But we certainly wouldn’t say no to a visit at the Manor before the party. Hopefully we can spend some time catching up this coming week.”

“Every day,” said Hermione instantly. “We’ll spend every day with you.”

Her parents smiled. “We’re looking forward to it dear,” said her mother. “And I have to say, I’m thrilled you found a good one.” She was nodding toward Draco who grinned.

“I did...” said Hermione softly. “I really, *really* did.”

Chapter 30: Epilogue: 20 Years Later

Chapter Notes

A/N: That's all for this one! I have another Dramione in the works that's a bit different from anything else I've done, and it should be up in the spring. Thank you for indulging me in my romantic, billionaire boyfriend fic 😊

Thanks again for the lovely reviews. I hope you enjoyed!

Draco

Draco chuckled as he watched his second child and heir scowl at the couples on the dance floor.

“Scorp,” he said, coming up to him. “You should just ask her to dance.”

His son, who had just turned seventeen, turned to glare at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said quickly.

Draco rolled his eyes. His son’s fascination with the young witch had been apparent to Draco and Hermione for the last year or more.

“I’m talking about Lily, obviously,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Lily Potter. Just go ask her.”

To his credit, Scorpius didn’t blush. But his mouth did tighten just a bit, which showed his discomfort at his father’s words.

“First of all,” said Scorpius, “You’re barking. She’s Lily. She’s practically my cousin. Second, she has a boyfriend, or didn’t you notice the giant Tosser she’s been dancing with all night?”

Draco smirked.

“First of all, she’s *not* your cousin. You don’t have any cousins, and Lily has about a thousand cousins. She doesn’t need you to join the bandwagon. Second, the Tosser is just a minor detail. He’s a distraction until you make your move.”

“Why on *earth* would you think that?” asked Scorpius. “She’s been dating him since March 10.”

Draco struggled not to laugh. “You have a remarkably clear memory about that, son. And I reckon she decided to date him because you didn’t have the balls to ask her to dance at your grandmother’s New Year’s Eve party, nor did you ask her out afterwards. You just stared at her all night.”

Now Scorpius turned and glared at him. “I did *not*.”

“You did too,” said Draco calmly. “But I am *certain* that the minute she thinks you’re willing to make a move she’ll drop the Tosser and date you instead.”

Scorpius’s eyes narrowed. “And what makes you say that?”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “She mostly ignores him except when you’re around. I’ve never caught her out of bed snogging him like some of her previous boyfriends. And I saw you two on the boat a few weeks ago. Neither one of you left the pool.”

It was true. His son, who was the only one of his children who had inherited Draco’s blonde hair and gray eyes, had also inherited his mother’s tight curls and ability to tan. He had spent most of their annual summer trip with his shirt off by the pool, while Lily Potter lounged nearby in a bathing costume that both Harry and Draco felt was far too small for her.

Draco might be rooting for his son on this, but Lily *was* his goddaughter after all.

Scorpius gave his father a hopeful look. “You’ve never caught them snogging? Really?”

“Not once,” said Draco. “And I caught her a fair few times in fourth year and the beginning of fifth year. She knows I always let her off easier than the other Gryffindors.”

“Because you have a soft spot for her,” said Scorpius.

Draco shrugged. “Of course. But my point is, she’s not that into him. She’s using him to make you jealous.”

“You really think so?” Scorpius now sounded intrigued and slightly hopeful.

“Absolutely. Now go ask her to dance. It’s the polite thing to do. She’s a bridesmaid and you’re a groomsman. Victoire even paired you two together. I’d wager Lily asked her to do it.”

“And her boyfriend...” started Scorpius, but Draco rolled his eyes.

“Scorp, you’re a Slytherin. Lily’s dating a Hufflepuff. He has no chance whatsoever if you actually move in. Just be subtle about it. And lock her down early in the year, won’t you? Some of the seventh year girls are going to be a nightmare once you get back to school, and you want to make sure things with Lily are strong before you leave Hogwarts and you two have a year apart.”

Draco’s son and his goddaughter were only a couple months apart in age. Scorpius was actually born on Potter’s birthday and Lily was born on Hermione’s birthday two months

later. The timing, however, meant that they weren't in the same grade at Hogwarts. Scorpius was one of the youngest in his class, while Lily was one of the oldest in hers.

"We both know Harry will actually kill me."

"Harry's your godfather. He won't kill you. He hasn't killed the Tosser yet, has he?" asked Draco, reasonably.

Scorpius glanced toward Harry, who was talking to James and Albus in another corner of the room. All three were casting dark looks at Lily and her boyfriend on the dance floor.

"They're plotting something," said Scorpius. "Look at them. And if it's *me*..."

"The only one you might have to worry about is James," said Draco. "I'll admit he may not look too kindly on it. But Harry and Al would probably be relieved. I seriously doubt Al will give her the Marauder's Map while she's dating the Tosser."

Scorpius turned to look at his father in amazement. "You know about the map?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Of *course* I know about it. And since you're of age and I actually approve of the witch you want, I'll let you in on a little secret as long as it stays between us. Your mother and I used the map for years to catch students out of bed until Teddy started at Hogwarts. Once he came along your mum spent a couple years working out the magic to create a duplicate, which we still use. I know the map used to be Harry's, and he gave it to Teddy in fifth year, who passed it to James after he left Hogwarts, who then passed it to Albus. Now it's Lily's turn since Albus is gone."

Scorpius shifted a bit uncomfortably now.

"What?" asked Draco, suddenly suspicious.

"Al didn't give it to her. He gave it to me."

Draco smirked. "I'm not terribly surprised. And your feelings about Lily are so obvious that he wouldn't have done it unless he approved in some way."

Scorpius bit his lip as he considered this.

"And while we're on the topic of the map, let me give you another piece of unsolicited advice, which is my prerogative as your father."

Scorpius rolled his eyes at this, but just raised an eyebrow in question.

"If you want to take Lily to some place where your mother can't find you, the Room of Requirement is unplottable. You might notice it doesn't show up on the Marauder's Map. It doesn't show up on ours either."

Now Scorpius turned to look at him fully. "Wait, really? I've never noticed."

“It’s true,” said Draco. “It’s not on either map. Now that doesn’t mean your mother won’t check there, but she has to get the right version of the room to be let in. Get creative. Ask for a place with a beach. Or a place with a forest. Something like that. She’ll never guess.”

Scorpius narrowed his eyes. “Why are you telling me all this?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “You know why. I like Lily. She is on the approved list. That list happens to be vanishingly small, and she tops it. Seeing as you two actually like each other, I see no reason to discourage it as long as you remember the contraceptive charm.”

“Bloody hell, Dad,” said Scorpius, now with a pained look on his face.

“I’m serious, Scorp. Cast the charm first.”

“I’m not likely to forget, am I? What with Mum teaching everybody sex ed in third year... Bloody hell I couldn’t show my face in the Slytherin common room for *weeks*.”

Draco smirked. “Yes, well, Lily seems to have gotten over it. But I expect you to remember the charm. And if you find yourself forgetting like I did, get her on a potion.”

“Oh my *God* Dad I do not need to know this!”

Draco shrugged. “Your mother was very distracting when she decided to sweep me off my feet.”

“She always said you were the one to sweep her off of *her* feet,” said Scorpius, looking relieved that his father had moved on from the contraceptive charm.

“Oh no, I was simply trying to return the favor to make her fall for me. Her very presence absolutely enchanted me with no effort at all. It still does, as a matter of fact. But my point is, it can be distracting in the moment. So charm first, then potion.”

“Good God, Dad, I’m not shagging Lily.”

“Not yet,” agreed Draco. “But if you would get your head out of your arse and ask her to dance, then you’d be one step closer to it.”

Scorpius’s nostrils flared at this, but finally he narrowed his eyes. “You really think I can move in on the Hufflepuff then?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” said Draco instantly. “Hufflepuffs are not amorous by nature. Gryffindors are though. Lily probably selected him because he’s a safe choice while she waits for you to come around.”

Scorpius glared at his father a bit. “You always say that about Hufflepuffs,” he muttered. “But Lyra...”

“Your sister was a true member of Hufflepuff house,” interjected Draco airily. “I never once caught her out of bed or snogging a boy. In fact, I don’t think she’s ever held hands with a

wizard. It was one of the greatest moments of my life when I watched her get sorted into Hufflepuff."

Lyra was Draco's first child, and she was a year older than Scorpius. After their engagement, he and Hermione waited until the following summer to get married so that her parents could participate, and they could take an extended honeymoon in the south pacific. Hermione went off of her potion right away, and to their surprise they had no trouble conceiving Lyra. She was born around their first anniversary.

To Draco's relief, Hermione agreed that Theo and Blaise could be her godfathers, but she had asked for something in exchange. She told Draco he had to let her pick the godparents of their second child and also give her exclusive naming rights over Lyra. Draco's only counterproposal was that the name had to be celestial to go along with Black family tradition, and they struck their deal. Hermione had made him squirm a little by keeping her name choice a secret until their daughter was born, but Draco had to admit that he loved her name almost as much as he loved her.

Lyra, of course, had been an enormous surprise to Lucius in particular, who had been expecting a boy. But after Draco told Hermione about the spell, they decided to go about securing the title the old fashioned way. Hermione declared the spell to be nothing more than wizarding eugenics, and Draco had to admit he rather agreed with her about that. Besides, he found that the title became much less important to him once Hermione agreed to try for kids in the first place. Girl or boy, he didn't care.

Still, Scorpius's appearance a year after Lyra made Lucius breathe a sigh of relief. To their surprise Hermione's fertility issues didn't arise until it was time to try for their third child, several years after that. They were eventually successful, but there was a large age gap between Scorpius and their youngest child, Carina.

"Lyra's dating Fred Weasley," said Scorpius calmly.

Draco spit out his drink.

"*What?*" he asked in horror.

"You heard me. She's dating Fred."

"But he's... he's..." said Draco weakly.

Draco had lost count of the number of times he had caught Fred out of bed and shagging during his last couple of years at Hogwarts. In fact, Draco hadn't just caught him on the parapet of the Astronomy Tower — Draco had once caught him on the *roof* of the Astronomy Tower. According to Fred, the parapet was old news.

There was no way his sweet, innocent, first born little girl could be dating in the first place, let alone a wizard like *him*.

"He's really into Lyra," said Scorpius. "He took her skiing in the alps over New Years. That's why she missed Gran's party."

Draco just gaped. “She told us she was going on a trip with friends!”

“She lied,” said Scorpius simply.

“Well then why the fuck didn’t *you* tell me?” asked Draco, now truly outraged.

“I didn’t know at the time,” shrugged Scorpius. “Besides, she said she would help with Lily if I kept my mouth shut. But seeing as how she’s snogging him on the dance floor right now, I assume the secret’s out.”

Draco spun around to find his darling little girl having her face sucked off by that bastard.

“Oh I will *kill* him...” started Draco, but Scorpius put a hand on his dad’s arm.

“Mum will have your balls, and not in the way you like,” he said dryly.

Draco shot a look at his son before glancing at Hermione across the room. She was watching Lyra and practically beaming.

A muscle in Draco’s jaw twitched as he fought to control his temper. He would have to talk to Hermione about this. Maybe he would tie her up first. Then he would dominate her so she would agree to anything he wanted. Draco felt his cock twitch as he contemplated it.

“I’m not in favor,” said Draco shortly.

“I can tell,” said Scorpius with amusement. “But you can’t stop her from dating forever.”

“You should be supporting me in this,” said Draco. “She’s your sister.”

“She’s my *big* sister,” said Scorpius. “I don’t mind Fred. And Lyra’s been very helpful with Lily. Lyra’s the one who suggested I take some private lessons from Professor Fawley to improve my dueling. Lyra reckons I should try partnering with her in dueling club next year.”

Draco had to admit that was a rather good idea. But the fact that it had come from his darling little girl... no. Just no.

“And Carina?” asked Draco, now very perturbed. “Will you let Carina just date whoever the fuck she wants?”

Now Scorpius’s face darkened. “Cari isn’t dating anybody until she’s at least thirty,” he said firmly. “She’s my baby sister.”

Draco nodded, a bit mollified now. “Thank Merlin for small favors. She’ll be in Hufflepuff too. I’m sure of it. She’s far too sweet for any other House.”

“We’ll find out in a couple weeks won’t we? I certainly hope so, if you’re right about Hufflepuffs.”

“I’ve had twenty years to observe the behavior of students in each House. Trust me, Hufflepuff is what we need to be rooting for.”

At this, Scorpius took a sip of his drink and seemed to steel himself. “Alright then. Time to just fucking do it and move in on the Tosser.”

Draco smirked as his son banished his glass and then strode toward the dance floor and interrupted them. He *so* wished he had an extendable ear for this. The Tosser – whose real name was Barry Burke – scowled a bit, but Draco could see Scorpius turning on the old Malfoy charm. He was surely explaining that he and Lily were part of the wedding party. Of *course* they needed to dance together. The bride and groom and all of their family members would expect it, after all. Lily’s eyes sparkled, and Draco just chuckled as she sent Barry off with a dismissive wave of her hand and turned her full attention to Scorpius.

“He’s finally making his move then?” asked Ginny excitedly as she came over to stand near Draco. He saw Hermione and Potter joining them too.

“Sure is,” said Draco with some satisfaction. “That one’s been coming for a while.”

“Oh thank God,” said Harry, now looking at Scorpius and Lily. “That kid – Billy? Barney? Whatever the fuck his name is, he is the *worst*.”

Draco snorted into his drink, while Hermione gave Potter a disapproving glare.

“I told you he was just a distraction,” said Ginny in a placating voice. “She’s wanted Scorp for well over a year now.”

“I’ve never been so happy to lose a thousand galleons in my life,” muttered Potter, as he watched them.

“*A thousand galleons!*” hissed Hermione and Ginny at the same time.

“Inflation,” said Draco and Potter in response to their wives’ horror.

“Oh for *heaven’s* sake,” said Hermione, rolling her eyes. “You two have been betting on our children’s love lives?”

“Just the timing, darling,” said Draco soothingly. “We’ve all known those two were bound to get together eventually.”

“I’m just glad it happened sooner rather than later,” said Potter. “The only wizards around her age that I have *ever* approved of are her cousins, Teddy, and Scorpius. That’s the entire list. Seeing as her cousins are off limits for obvious reasons, and Teddy married Victoire a couple hours ago, that leaves Scorpius as the only remaining choice.”

Draco smirked. He knew this of course, hence the nudge he had given Scorpius.

“And why is that?” asked Hermione with narrowed eyes. “Not that I’m not *thrilled*, mind you. But there are plenty of other perfectly nice wizards her age.”

“Yes, perfectly nice wizards who just want to shag her or get a piece of her fame for being our daughter or access to her trust. That’s *exactly* what I want for her,” said Potter rolling his eyes.

“It may take Scorp a few weeks to fully cut Barry out, but once he does I’ll make sure he doesn’t fuck it up with her,” said Draco firmly. “You know we have the same concerns. Even Hermione admits it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at this, but didn’t object further, and Draco and Potter exchanged knowing glances. They had discussed this problem extensively over the years. It was a problem with all of their children, but they had discovered it was particularly difficult when it came to Scorpius on the one hand and Lily on the other. They were nearly as famous as their parents, and it did them no favors when it came to dating. Draco knew that he and Potter had hoped for this match even more than their wives did.

Not that he was friends with Potter. No, their families just vacationed together and socialized with one another. And Draco rather liked the Potter children, especially his goddaughter. If Lyra absolutely *had* to date a boy, he would rather it be Albus or even James than sodding *Fred Weasley*.

Draco forced those dark thoughts out of his head as he stared at his son smiling down at the young witch. Draco knew the signs: Scorpius was smitten.

“Potter,” he said suddenly.

Potter quirked an eyebrow.

“I’ll go double or nothing on that bet that they’re exclusive by the end of September.”

Potter raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued, while their wives rolled their eyes.

“I’ll take that bet,” he said. “I think it will take him a bit longer than that to work up the courage to ask.”

They shook on it, and Draco smiled.

Time to get to work, son.

The doors to the Great Hall burst open, and Draco watched as the older students began to pour in from the carriages. Every year Draco and Hermione floo’d from Hogwarts to the Manor with their Hogwarts-aged children to escort them to the train. The children then rode the train back home to Hogwarts over the course of seven hours, while Hermione and Draco reversed their journey from the Manor to floo back in time for lunch. Draco had always thought it was a bit silly since the kids had lived with them in their three-bedroom staff apartment their whole lives, but Hermione insisted. She said the journey to and from Hogwarts by train was simply magical, and she wouldn’t want her children to miss it.

Draco watched curiously until he caught the blond curly head of his son, which was bent down to talk to a red-headed witch quite a few inches shorter than him. Draco smirked to see it was Lily. Poor Barry was trailing behind them in their wake, as all three made their way to the Gryffindor table first, where Lily sat down among her friends. Scorpius greeted them too, and Draco was amused to see all of them watching Scorpius and Lily with wide eyes, while Barry stood awkwardly behind them.

Now Scorpius leaned down and said something in her ear that made her clap her hand over her mouth and start to giggle uncontrollably, and then Scorpius stood with a satisfied smile and dropped the bag he had been carrying next to Lily as he made small talk for a few more moments.

“Oooh he’s carrying her bag too?” asked Hermione with interest.

Draco looked at his wife in amusement.

“I rather thought you would be cheering for Barry.”

“Oh of course not, don’t be ridiculous. Scorpius and Lily are just adorable. But I have to admit, I never realized his manners were that good.”

“Scorpius has exquisite manners when he chooses to use them,” retorted Draco. “I hired the same deportment tutor who trained me.”

“Yes, yes, I *know*,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Still. It’s odd how they have suddenly emerged now that he has a witch to impress.”

Draco inclined his head in acknowledgment, as they both watched Scorpius flash one last smile toward Lily before clapping Barry on the shoulder as he made his way back to the Slytherin table. He cast a glance up at his parents and caught Draco’s eye. Draco raised an eyebrow questioningly, and Scorpius made a gesture that told Draco he was clearly working on it.

“Excellent,” he said, rubbing his palms together. “Potter will be paying up by the end of the month.”

“You two drive me and Ginny mad, I hope you know that.”

“Just as long as you’ll let me drive you *really* mad tonight, love.”

“Oh hush, here come the first years!”

Draco fell silent as the line of first year students walked in, following Professor Flitwick, who was due to retire at the end of the year. Draco was pleased the tiny wizard was hanging on for one more term. Next year Hermione would be taking over the Sorting, and Draco was happy they would be able to watch their youngest child be sorted together this year.

Draco watched as Carina looked out at the crowd of students, seeking out those she knew. There were a few of the younger Weasley cousins still at Hogwarts, and Draco caught Scorpius winking at her.

Soon Professor Flitwick squeaked, “Malfoy, Carina!” and she walked forward to the stool, her long, straight brown hair swishing as she moved.

Draco watched eagerly as she sat on the stool with her back straight, ankles crossed, and hands folded primly in her lap, exactly like she had been taught.

She’ll make a perfect Hufflepuff, Draco thought proudly.

He felt Hermione reach for his hand under the table, and he squeezed it as Filius dropped the Sorting Hat on her head, and they waited and waited and waited until...

“*GRYFFINDOR!*” the Hat shouted.

“No!” cried Draco in dismay while Hermione let out a delighted laugh.

“I got one! Draco, I got one!”

He turned to stare at her in horror.

“What do you mean, you got one?”

“One of our kids! Neither of us got Lyra, and you got Scorpius. Cari was my last chance! Oh this is just thrilling!”

Draco just gaped at her. How on *earth* could his wife want their baby – their *actual* baby – to be in the most reckless House of all?

“She was supposed to be in Hufflepuff!” he declared.

“Oh hush, she was never going to be a ‘Puff,” said Hermione. “It was always a question of Gryffindor or Slytherin for her.”

“What do you mean? She’s so sweet! She’s a Hufflepuff!”

“Absolutely not,” said Hermione firmly. “Who do you think broke into our room last year to steal our map and pass letters between her big sister and Fred Weasley so you wouldn’t catch them?”

Draco looked at her in utter horror.

“You never *told* me?”

Hermione shrugged. “I didn’t know. Lyra told me just before term started. I was rather impressed Cari managed to do it right under our noses. I didn’t know any of our kids were even aware we had our own map. But evidently Lyra and Cari both knew about it.”

“Fucking hell,” said Draco, now staring at his youngest daughter in disbelief, who was shaking hands with students in her House.

“We should probably tell Scorpius about it too. It’s only fair,” added Hermione.

“Scorp knows,” Draco said curtly.

Hermione gave him an exasperated look, but didn’t press him on it further. Draco caught Scorpius’s eye, and he was pleased to see Scorpius was grimacing at the outcome of his little sister’s sorting. They exchanged dark looks, and Scorpius just gave him a small nod. Draco let out a sigh of relief. Scorpius would be able to keep the Gryffindor boys in line for at least a year or two. Perhaps he would recruit some of the younger Weasley boys to help after Scorpius was out. They all viewed Carina as a little sister.

For now.

Fuck, he needed a drink.

Hermione was practically bouncing with joy during the rest of the start of term feast, leaving Draco to his rather foul mood. At long last the students rose to head to their dorms, and Draco saw Carina give both him and Hermione a small wave of excitement as she followed her new House mates to her dorm, where she would be living for the rest of the year.

His heart melted a little bit, as it always did, and he found himself smiling a bit, despite himself.

Hermione rose first, so Draco rose too, and they slowly made their way back to the staff common room and down the small hall that held the staff quarters. They walked to the end of the hall, and as always, Draco glanced to the right at the door that used to be Hermione’s before turning left through the door directly across the hall from it. To everyone’s surprise, it had magically appeared after Draco and Hermione’s wedding, and they had been living there ever since.

It was oddly silent as they walked inside, until Draco heard a giant sniff behind him.

He turned to find Hermione’s eyes watering.

“What is it darling?” he asked in concern.

“Oh nothing, it’s just... our nest is empty, Draco. Of course Cari will live here for the summers, but until then...”

Draco smiled softly. She was right of course. He and Hermione had spent nights away from their children now and then. They even made a point to take a week away without them each year to reconnect and focus on each other. But their nest hadn’t truly been empty at night since they brought Lyra home from St. Mungo’s over eighteen years earlier.

“It’s hard to believe,” he said as he pulled her toward him. “And it’s heartbreaking in a way that they are growing up.”

She sniffed again and nodded.

“But there’s a silver lining, darling,” he said as he began to trace a pattern up her arm.

“Oh?” she asked, and now she was smiling a little through her tears.

“No more silencing charms at night.”

Hermione laughed as she pulled him toward her.

“Kiss me, Draco. Don’t stop,” she whispered.

Draco leaned down to catch her lips. He knew he never would.

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